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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
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The Fourth Sunday of Lent (B)
Laetare Sunday

Laetare, Ierusalem! Rejoice, Jerusalem! Rejoice, all who belong to Lord our God! "This is the day the LORD has made, let us rejoice in it and be glad!" (Psalm 118:24).

We may think it odd to hear such words in the midst of the season of Lent, a season which we typically associate with weeping and with sorrow. Certainly these emotions and mindsets are a part of the Lenten observance, but if we stop here then we miss the very meaning of this season of grace and of mercy. Lent always looks to Baptism, to freedom from sin, to life, to joy, to glory. Can there be any greater cause for rejoicing than this? Can anything bring us greater joy than knowing that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life"? (John 3:16).

We know full well that through our pride and selfishness and sin we lost the blessed state in which we were created and we were cast out from the presence of God. It is a pain that we feel even today. We sometimes feel abandoned by God; at other times we feel that have utterly failed him, but we are not without hope because in Christ Jesus "God has visited his

people" (Luke 7:16). For "God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ," all because of his love (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Because of our sin we, like the Israelites, had been taken captive by the Enemy and made subject to sin and death. No longer were we free but we were slaves to sin with no possible means of escape; we could do nothing to regain our freedom. But then, "in the blink of an eye" (I Corinthians 15:52) the tables were turned when the Father, because of his love, sent the archangel Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin Mary with this announcement:

Behold, you will conceive and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:31-33).

At the very moment Gabriel stood before Mary our freedom and salvation was close at hand. For Jesus Christ, to whom "all power in heaven and on earth has been given" (Matthew 28:18), has come to us to save us from the power of sin and death and to free us from our captivity, to restore us to the "glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

From his glorious position on the throne of the Cross, lifted up for all to see, Jesus proclaims to the world:

All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of [my] people, let him go up, [knowing that I am] with him! (II Chronicles 36:23).

We were doomed to death, but now, through the self-giving love of Christ, the sentence has been lifted, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). Through the power of his love he brings us now into his house, and not as slaves but as friends (cf. John 15:15).

We know that we belong to Christ, we know that he has saved us, and yet we grow complacent in our faith; we openly rebel against him choosing our own will over his; we sin and we fall short of the glory he has given us. So Holy Mother Church gives us this "joyful season when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed (Preface, Lent I). It is a blessed time to return to the Lord, to dedicate ourselves again to living as his faithful servants, those who truly belong to his household. It is a time for us to cease our evil thoughts and deeds, to stop walking in the darkness and to begin walking anew in the light of the Lord. It is a time for us to embrace

the power of the Paschal Mystery in each of our lives. How, then, do we do this?

Jesus says to us today, "Whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God" (John 3:21). Jesus also tells us, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). To live the truth, then, means to live in Jesus Christ, to recognize that in Baptism we have been made one with Christ and have become a "new creation" (II Corinthians 5:17). Living in Christ Jesus we journey within into heaven where the brilliant light of God is so beautiful and bright that even the angels shield their faces. How then do we always remember that we are new creations in Christ Jesus? How do we always live as true and faithful members of his house? Let us follow the advise of St. Clare of Assisi:

O dearest one, look up to heaven, which calls us on, and take up the cross and follow Christ who has gone on before us: for through him we shall enter into his glory after many and diverse tribulations. Love God from the depths of your heart and Jesus, his Son, who was crucified for us sinners. Never let the thought of him leave your mind but meditate constantly on the mysteries of the cross (Letter to Blessed Ermuntrude of Bruges, 9-12).

We must always focus on the "Son of Man [who was] lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John

3:14-15). The Cross is the source of our joy and it is to the Cross that the season of Lent leads us, and for this reason it is a joyful season.

Pausing today should fill us with the joy of the Risen Lord for today we are reminded that the final victory is already won because of the power of his love, a love that is stronger than death (cf. Song of Songs 8:6). We know that Christ has forever conquered sin and death and that his love is with us always. Let this be our consolation and our hope as together we journey toward Easter. God loves us. Let us rejoice and be glad.