

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

The Rev. Robert G. Eaton, Interim Rector
All Saints' Episcopal Church, San Diego, CA

We've been preaching this Lent about resistance to God. And we have focused on the benefit we ourselves receive when we finally STOP resisting God, which results in our spiritual satisfaction and joy. Today we have the opportunity to consider someone else besides ourselves, that is, the benefit that God Himself receives when we finally give in to His mercy and love. This would be the Sunday to consider such, The Sunday of Rejoice.

O Lord, as we hear of thy faithful mercies, let thy Word settle into our hearts and souls, as oil settles into bone. Amen.

So, here we are at "Laetare" Sunday (leh-TAH-reh). It means to rejoice. Sometime when you are with other people in a social setting outside the walls of the Church, just exclaim that word out loud. For instance, someone in the group starts to share how happy they were when the Oregon Ducks Women's Basketball team beat the Jackrabbits of South Dakota. And you break out with "Lae TA re!!!" Which will cause a certain response of blankness, of course – unless the social setting is a regional conference on Latin as Second Language classes. Still, you've got their attention, and so you then have the opportunity to share the meaning of the word, and how important it is to describe our life in Jesus Christ; and wouldn't you like to know more?!

This is the ancient Sunday of mid-Lent, with its ancient tradition of calling it Laetare Sunday. The name is based on the first Latin words in the ancient processional introit sung for 1200 years by the monastic choir: "*Laetare Jerusalem, et conventum facite omnes qui dili-gitis eam*", etc., that is, "Rejoice, O Jerusalem: and come together all you that love her," taken from the last chapter of Isaiah, verse 10. If you love God, you will love Jerusalem, and as we come to Jerusalem we come united in joy as the people of God.

Today in our lessons, we hear of much rejoicing. Think of the rejoicing that must have taken place by the People of Israel as the Lord caused a second parting of the water, and their entrance into the promised land; and to Paul and the Corinthians, as he shared the theology of our reconciled joy and the ministry as new creations in Christ; but also to the parable of the prodigal son, or some say, the parable of the father of mercy, or the forgiving father. In the last line of our gospel reading, the word of joy is spoken,

"But we had to celebrate and **rejoice**, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

March 31, 2019

This is the response in these witnesses. Joy. So, the scriptural witness for this REJOICE Sunday.

Our Lenten theme has to do with finding where our resistance to God has been.

- In regard to that resistance, we find ourselves rejoicing when we stop resisting God's expression of Mercy to us, because we have found Peace.

- We rejoice, we experience joy, in being the people who make reconciliation possible, ambassadors of such great and good news in the same way God the Father made it possible by the work of Jesus on the cross.

- We have joy in knowing that the reconciliation of the new covenant is profoundly more and even different than the way of the Old Testament. No longer simply a cover over, but now an outright exchange by removal.

- There is also the JOY found in the Body of Christ, as the testimony of those giving up resisting God and therefore reconciliation is heard by sharing, and brought forth in thanksgiving, and experienced in the passion of our worship.

- Even the liturgical colors of the day change, so we can have a visual reminder of rejoicing, as we are now that much closer to the Great Celebration and Thanksgiving of the Resurrection.

We have heard of all these benefits to us, where Joy in the Lord is released in us and in our Christian Community when we stop resisting God's work to be done in us, and find our ability to rejoice.

But there is **another**. I want you to hear and comprehend another aspect of the rejoicing **besides our own**, and that is

The rejoicing BY **God**, as the scripture speaks of, the Joy OF the Lord.

I think a lot of people have this impression of God being sour-faced, knit brow, arms folded body language. And quite frankly, I don't blame God for having that kind of outlook towards humanity in general.

There is though another way to see God as he has expressed himself in **delight**. I mean, that God has shown himself as delighted. Call it the Joy of the Lord. And not just "the Joy of the Lord is my strength," as something that originates in God for our strengthening. I mean when GOD is HAPPY and Joyful. When GOD rejoices.

And when God is Loved, He is also Delighted, and Happy and Joyful.

There is a wonderful prophecy from Zephaniah that paints a picture of God's joy, found in the book of [Zephaniah 3:17](#). It includes an interesting description of God **singing** over people: "The LORD your God is with you," said the prophet speaking God's own

March 31, 2019

word, "he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, "he rejoices over you with a shout of joy."

God rejoices with His people, and He expresses joy when His people praise Him.

The question then is, why is God so joyful? This passage of Zephaniah speaks of a future time when God has ended His judgment upon Israel. All of their enemies have been destroyed, and Israel is entering a time of safety and blessing (verses 8, 15, 19).

Zephaniah is speaking of the future millennial kingdom when the Messiah (Jesus) will reign with His people in Jerusalem (Isaiah 9:7; Revelation 20:1-6).

When enemies are set down and peace of God's kingdom is reigning, God is delighted. God rejoices. God is full of joy. In this passage, the enemies are destroyed because they failed to do God's bidding. And God will sing over his people. How much more joy is literally, in the Lord, when God's will of reconciliation is accomplished by personal desire and motivation, even in the one soul.

So Also, we need to underline, God HAS joy, and the capacity to BE delighted.

Jesus speaks of this Joy, and Rejoicing in the 5th chapter of John's gospel, when he says, "These things I have spoken to you, that MY joy may be in YOU, and that your joy may be full." Jesus teaches his ways, with the hope that we will not resist his ways, his teachings, his commands. And of course, as always with God, not only does he rejoice, but it goes beyond him alone into his creation. That is, the purpose is that HIS joy will be OUR joy.

There is much joy from God. God's way has been accomplished. What God has placed in you in faith when it has been received, He is joyful. That the favor of God, His love towards you which empowers, motivates and enables you to love and delight in Him has just been cashed in, and there is an overflow from heaven! So we find our worship of God also filled. And not only our worship down here, so to speak.

And, of course, heaven itself is rejoicing. because we have ended our resistance to the Father, we have repented of our own offense. ([Luke 15:10](#)), and all is made right with God.

And now, just to see again that we are taught that there is Delight in God the Father when we end our resistance and come to him, we look back to the Parable that Jesus told. We hear about this father who has given half of the inheritance away to his younger son, and it didn't get invested in new property and farming for an abundant return. It got squandered, lost, thrown away. And yet, this same father, seeing his son in the distance, showed compassion, that is, mercy. In the parable Jesus gives the first response of the father not anger at a returning forlorn betrayal, but mercy toward a son who will show himself repentant. And the father's response then is to rejoice. And with the rejoicing is the party, the celebration, the joyous reception of one who is now not dead to him, but alive to him.

March 31, 2019

This parable Jesus told to do several teachings, but the center one is about **God** the Father, and the personal rejoicing of God the Father, over the ones who seemed to be in the fold, but left, got lost, got burned by their own actions, and then returned with penitent and obedient hearts. This is the Father in Heaven who shows us HIS rejoicing. What a joyous thing for us to see the Father's heart, and to see the Rejoicing that the Father shows. .

What is there to do then as to how we take this good news of the rejoicing of God, if the lesson is about God's joy? It is found in the remaining story of the older brother. Do you not hear absolute resistance to the story line of God's mercy, and forgiveness and reception? Yes, and this is the inherent human response. I believe part of the reason that the scripture teaches about the nature of God to also show rejoicing is to model what we are to do with each other, and second, to motivate each of us to be God's people, and to do what God has asked us to do in the first place. This is a holy motivation, truly unselfish.

As humans we get these things wrong all the time. We want people to be happy with us, because we don't want to feel rejected, and for manipulative purposes. We've already seen this is not God's intention. He doesn't need to feel wanted. He has made us, however, to be worshipping Him, and so he shows the possibility of having His delight and joy as our goal.

As well, we cannot always see into the hearts of others as Jesus has done in his ministry, and as God the Father in the parable can do. We will need to resist only showing mercy without consideration of repentance. It is a tough line – only showing judgement, or only showing mercy. We see both in the world around us. So, as Christians, we're not simply going to head out of here today and be mercy only people. But we want to do as God the Father has done, so this will be the end-purpose of our mission, to invite people into the joy of the Lord, where mercy is given. We do not have control over people's hearts, and the end of the parable shows this clearly. And we cannot always see from afar off...as the Father in the parable did. But we can pray to be discerning, and that truth will be shown, and the older brothers of the world will share in the Father's joy, and pray to see rejoicing accomplished. And along with praying to be such, we must take the steps to TRAIN ourselves ourselves to show mercy, and to delight in the repentant, and those moments when others what we have sharing with and praying for, end their resistance and also take delight in the Lord..

So, we hear the good news of Jesus bringing us the opportunity to be a delight to the Lord, and Thank the Lord that He rejoices within himself, and has shown us what true rejoicing looks like.

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

March 31, 2019