

RETURN TO JOY

“You shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.”

“O God, Father of the faithful, You led Your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the Promised Land. Guide now the people of Your church, that following our Savior we may walk through the wilderness of this world toward the glory of the world to come; as You live and reign with the Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.” (Collect for Lent I)

What is the one thing God wants His people to know today?

Even for the solemnity of the season now upon us, as well as for that life in this world is laying on our shoulders, let the people of God rejoice and give thanks for all the Lord has done and is doing in our midst.

Why do they need to know it?

How often our hearts become heavy with the cares of this world. As a community, we’ve been separated ... far too long. The people of God are fearful, even as we have been humbled. Perhaps, some are even feeling alienated from God. Sin does that. Fear does that, as do shame, regret, hurt and anger. But the Lord bids His people to rejoice. His grace has sustained us thus far. It will see us home.

[AMAZING GRACE, HOW SWEET THE SOUND!]

What do they need to do?

To do no more than what He has always bid His chosen people to do. Don’t forget His blessings. Bring them to remembrance daily, hourly! Remember. Then, *“Return to the Lord your God,”* by way of repentance – a repentance that leads to refreshment and renewal. Where, finally, rejoice, for the gifts our Savior gives – especially to the least, the last and the lost. In Him, and the promise of His continued presence, we will be renewed and refreshed for the way.

Why do they need to do it?

We need this time with Him to sustain and reorient us to His promises. Where the end is in sight. Heaven awaits. For all who walk the way with Him. Arise, let us encourage one another for this year’s Lenten way!

How can I help them remember?

REMEMBER, REFRESH, REJOICE (REPEAT)

(Loosely adapted from Craddock, *Preaching through the Christian Year*, C, 136)

Introduction

A man named John once received a parrot as a gift. But the parrot had a bad attitude and an even worse vocabulary. Every word out of the bird's mouth was rude, obnoxious and laced with profanity.

John tried desperately to change the bird's attitude ... consistently speaking only polite words, often playing soft music, and anything else he could think of to "clean up" the bird's vocabulary. It didn't work.

So, in his desperation one day, John grabbed the bird and put it in the freezer. The parrot squawked and kicked and screamed, until suddenly there was total quiet. Not a peep was heard ... for several minutes ... when, fearing the worst, John quickly opened the door to the freezer.

The parrot calmly stepped out onto John's outstretched arms and said "I believe I have offended you with my rude language and actions. I'm sincerely remorseful for my inappropriate transgressions, and I fully intend to do everything I can to correct my rude behavior."

Stunned, John was about to inquire as to what had made for such a dramatic change, when the bird, continued, "By the way, might I inquire as to what that poor turkey did?" (<https://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/a-changed-parrot>)

Not typically a season of joy (for the color purple, the ashes, and the absence of our "alleluias"), a case can be made for *joy*. First, because in my counting, we've endured Lent already ... two solid years of it. But second, the Sundays of the season are Sundays "in" Lent, not "of" Lent. And so, a return to joy!

Main Point: God's continued grace and provision urges us to it - to joy! A goal that extends well beyond the 40 day journey we are on. Where, the Lord's mercies - aside being new every day - endure for a lifetime.

"Great is [His] faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:23)

Therefore, let us do what the redeemed of the Jesus do:

REMEMBER, REFRESH, REJOICE (REPEAT)

Amen.

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There is a lot to take in for the 40-day journey ahead of us, a journey that I am glad to take with you.

Yes, our journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter covers a lot of territory, where, with today's text, we do a fly-over of the saving events from the time of the patriarchs to the entrance of God's people into Promised Land. Other tour guides on our journey will be Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah ... each seeking to see us safely through as we hasten on in our "release from captivity and a new way through the wilderness." (Craddock, et. al. *Preaching through the Christian Year*, C, 135)

At the heart of our Lenten joy is this three-fold invitation ... first, to:

REMEMBER

⁵ "And you shall make response before the LORD your God, 'A wandering (or "perishing") Aramean (Jacob) was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number (70 souls), and there he became a nation (603,550 men over 20 + women and children¹), great, mighty, and populous. ⁶ [But] the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor.

Why does God choose whom He chooses to be His treasured possession ... to "set His love on" them? Not because of their strength. Jacob was an aging cripple ... a man once on the run. Israel as a nation were doomed to live out the rest of their days in slavery.

What of us?

Where, how often our hearts become heavy with the cares of this world. We're humbled, laid low for a season. Perhaps, some today are feeling the weight. Sin does that. Fear does that. But the Lord bids His people rejoice. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound!" The Lord loves you, and keeps His covenant and steadfast love. (Deuteronomy 7:7-9)

Which means that history irrelevant ... especially the history of our salvation. (Wesselschmidt, *CJ*, 21:1, 93) Not simply history, our lives are wrapped up in *His* story! Of how He created this world. How we got ourselves in this wretched, sinful predicament. But more, how God got us out ... of His gracious plan of extricating us through Jesus Christ.

¹ Exodus 1:5; Numbers 1:45-47

It's what Lent calls – recalls – us to. *Remember*. Where we've come from. What God has done. What He has brought us through.

But also to remember that He is *still* the God of history ... the God of *our* history ... whereby through His one and only Son He graciously brings us into it ... literally writing us into His story. (Philippians 4:3)

It's good to rehearse the past, to recall our story, yet unfinished ... to spur us on.

Which leads us to, secondly to:

REFRESH

⁷ Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil (anguish), and our oppression (lit. "being squeezed"²). ⁸ And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders.

One of the Biblical words for being refreshed is μετανοια – repentance! Active. Daily. Which, too, is very Lenten.

[Ref. SUBWAY ADS ON TV] ... scrapping the old, starting new ... pulling out all the stops, parading before us celebrity after celebrity in attempt to convince us that things have changed.

We know from where we have come. And how painful it is to change course ... creating distance from what who we are and the things we hold on in this world for comfort ... of laying our old selves and our sins at the foot of the cross.

The "Gospel handle" in our text is found in the word "toil."

Where, Jesus toiled also:

"Out of the anguish ("toil") of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." (Isaiah 53:11)

² Numbers 22:25

Repentance is not all “doom and gloom.” As Luther states in the *Small Catechism*, it consists of two parts. Wherein, our God does not leave us in the pit, even though we may be in the pits.

No, the better part of repentance is the refreshing Word of forgiveness ... God’s Word redemption, and the ensuing renewal such grace brings.

“Eat fresh, refresh” the aforementioned ad says, which may or may not deliver. But God’s grace always delivers, as the Lord in His grace and forgiveness brings us – like Israel – into that land flowing with milk and honey. (Deuteronomy 26:9)

Yes, our refreshment comes by way of our Lord’s promise. It comes by way of His Word ... and His Table.

BERNARD OF CLUNY: “Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest – the sight of it refreshes the weary and oppressed.”

Which leads the Lord’s redeemed to:

REJOICE

¹ “When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. ³ And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.’ ⁴ Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God.

¹⁰ And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. ¹¹ And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

What does our remembering and being refreshed look like in real time?

- ✚ A RETURN time and again to the well ... to the gifts that God offers.
- ✚ Also our heartfelt and joy-filled RESPONSE to His gifts in Word and deed ... to return to Him what is His!

Here, we offer to the Lord no cold leftovers here ... but the “best”!

“[God’s people] shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you.” (Deuteronomy 16:16, 17)

“Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce; ^{then} your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.” (Proverbs 3:9, 10)

NB: no amount is given! But only the best. A variety: “wheat, barley, grapes, figs, olives.” (Nielsen, *CJ*, 36:1, 43) Time, talents, treasure, trust!

✚ All the while REJOICING at all the Lord has done, will do, and is, even now doing in our midst, “*to you and to your house, the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.*”

NB: The LORD is directing it all ... from the first hearing of the prayers of His people, to bringing them out of Egypt, to giving them the land as an inheritance, to inviting them to the place where He chooses to be worshiped ... even giving the worshiper what to say!

Typically such an offering would be in response to the fruitfulness of the earth and the provision it gives to sustain us physically. However, at heart of the worship is not creation, but redemption!

Conclusion

“If we put off repentance another day, we have a day more to repent of, but a day less to repent in.” (William Mason, son of hymnist Lowell Mason)

Any of today’s “R” words would fit – REMEMBER, REFRESH, REJOICE.

None of these save us, but are a response to what God has done for us in Christ. “When I turn to God and by belief accept what God reveals, instantly the stupendous atonement of Jesus Christ rushes me into a right relationship with God. By the miracle of God's grace I stand justified, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Jesus has done.” (Oswald Chambers)

REMEMBER, REFRESH, REJOICE (REPEAT)

Amen.

Compared to this this age of hyper-sanitation, hand sanitizer, and anti-bacterial this and that, Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis was born in 1818 into a world of dying women, where even the finest hospitals were losing about one out of six mothers to what was called “childbed fever.” Where, a doctor’s daily routine began in the dissecting room where he would perform autopsies, and then, from there, make his way to the hospital to examine expectant mothers without ever pausing to wash his hands. It was Semmelweis who appeared as the first man in modern history to associate such examinations with the resultant infection and death. Where, after eleven years and the delivery of 8, 537 babies, Semmelweis lost only a small fraction of his mothers.

Spending much of his life lecturing and debating with colleagues, he argued, that the fever a mother suffered after giving birth was “caused by decomposed material, conveyed to a wound... [Which] I have shown how it can be prevented.... I am not asking anything world shaking,” he pleaded. “I am asking you only to wash your hands.” In the end, Semmelweis died insane at the age of 47, his wash basins discarded, and many of his colleagues laughing in his face. What continued was the death rattle of hundreds of mothers, ringing in their ears!

“Wash your hands.” In a way, that’s what the season of Lent is all about. Not so much about outward matters of giving up this or that, it’s more about the heart, and the transformational change that can happen when two things occur: 1. we acknowledge who we are, and our need for savior; and 2. to be met by that Savior, who forgives our sin, and gives us new life in His name. Any who take the time to meet this Savior in His Word and His Sacraments not only find a compassionate friend, but the very “Way, Truth and Life.” Indeed, few who meet this Savior truly remain the same.

So, I invite you to ... “wash your hands.” Not literally, though it’s still probably smart to do so. But spiritually, applying copious amounts of the Gospel to your heart and life, only to see your sin go down the drain, as you are continually cleansed, and transformed into the beautiful disciple that you are. Truth be told, every day we need cleansing. Where, thanks be to God, He gives us the means, and a place for that to happen. Going on about our lives without stopping to wash up will most certainly have disastrous consequences. But I believe you would agree, nothing feels better than a good shower. See you Sunday.