

The Rev. Brandon Ashcraft
The Fourth Sunday In Lent (Year B)
St. Paul's Episcopal Church (Cleveland Heights, Ohio)
March 10, 2024

Rejoicing in the Lenten Wilderness

Six years ago, this weekend, my seminary class took a pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral in England, the mother church of the Anglican Communion. That very same weekend, three of us were to be ordained deacons at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, which meant we had to delay our departure by one day. We arrived at our ordination service suitcases in hand, and left straight from the Cathedral for JFK, caught a flight to London, then drove the remaining two hours to Canterbury – not having slept since the bishop laid hands on our heads! We took our seats in the chancel of Canterbury Cathedral just as the opening hymn for the Sunday morning service began, still clothed in our clerical apparel from the prior day's ordination. After the service ended, the three brand new deacons had our photo taken with the Archbishop of Canterbury. The photo depicts the archbishop clad in beautiful *rose-colored* vestments, which provide a perpetual clue as to the liturgical date of the photo: the Fourth Sunday in Lent.

Today, the Fourth Sunday in Lent, has an interesting history. Going back centuries, in the tradition of the Church, this day has been known as “Laetare” Sunday. That’s because in the medieval church, the first word of the opening hymn on this day was “Laetare,” which is a Latin word meaning “rejoice.” You might be thinking: a hymn about “rejoicing” seems oddly placed during the solemn, penitential season of Lent. You would be correct, *and* that’s precisely the point. Laetare Sunday was intended to provide a respite from the austerity of the season. A moment of refreshment at the midpoint of Lent. A liturgical “pause button” on the seasonal practices of self-examination, repentance, fasting and self-denial. A day when chocolate can rain down like manna from heaven! On Laetare Sunday, the faithful were given a glimpse of the coming Easter joy to sustain them for the remainder of their Lenten journey. So, back to the archbishop’s rose-colored

vestments. As an outward and visible sign of this day's unique character, the penitential purple vestments of Lent are often traded for rose vestments: a color more commonly associated with joy and hope. But there are only two Sundays in the entire liturgical year when such rose vestments can be worn: today and the Third Sunday of Advent. As a result, many parishes, St. Paul's included, don't invest in the rose-colored vestments since they can only come out of the closet twice a year. (However, if anyone is feeling generous, I'll point out that Trinity Cathedral does have them!).

To be sure, this is all interesting liturgical history, but does it really matter? What does Laetare Sunday have to offer us besides an excuse for a trip to Mitchell's Ice Cream in the middle of Lent? At a more profound level, Laetare Sunday acknowledges our human hunger for grace amid adversity and uncertainty. And Laetare Sunday points us to God's faithful provision of that very grace. Whenever we are called to walk an arduous, unfamiliar path, it is human nature to want to know when and where that path will end. To seek signs of joy and hope in the face of an unknown future. Whether it's a journey through grief, the journey of finding a job, navigating a divorce, or discerning which college to attend...trusting God to bring us safely to our journey's end is difficult work. This was also true for our ancestors in the faith, as we heard so clearly in this morning's Old Testament Lesson from Numbers.

The Book of Numbers tells the story of the Israelites' 40-year journey through the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land. And when we meet the Israelites this morning, they are complaining – something they do over and over on this journey. What sets today's story apart from all the others is that today, instead of complaining to Moses as they usually do, the Israelites complain to God directly! In response to a prior complaint, God had provided the Israelites manna to eat. Food from heaven to sustain them in the wilderness. Instead of taking comfort in God's gracious provision of this manna, the Israelites demand a more varied menu. In response to their sin of ingratitude, God afflicts the Israelites with a plague of poisonous snakes, which leads them very

quickly to repent of their sin. And as God always does, God hears the cry of the Israelites and, in his mercy, God is moved to respond. He instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent and to lift it high upon a pole, which has the effect of saving those who are bit by the poisonous serpents.

This story, like so many stories of scripture, is a baffling one that raises all kinds of questions. But suffice it to say, what we see in this story is a God who is compassionate and merciful. A God who delivers his people from the consequence of their sin. And importantly for us as Christians, this *particular* story of God's compassion prefigures God's ultimate act of compassion. This *particular* story of God's mercy points forward, across the centuries, to God's greatest act of mercy: the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, who tells us in today's Gospel that, just as that serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, he too will be lifted up. Lifted up on the cross to rescue all who have been bitten by the serpent of sin. Lifted up in love for the sake of the world, to bestow upon all who desire it, the gift of eternal life.

The truth is, much like the Israelites, we often forget what God has done for us. Like them, we ignore the blessings in our lives and choose instead to grumble and complain. In our own wilderness wanderings, we struggle to put our trust in God. When we cannot see the journey's end, we all too often succumb to fear. But the gift of this refreshment Sunday is its reminder that our journey's end is not uncertain. Because God's Son, Jesus Christ, was lifted up for us, our journey's end is eternal life. Indeed, Laetare Sunday is more than pretty rose vestments. Laetare Sunday assures us that even in the austerity of the Lenten wilderness, there are sure and certain signs of joy. Even in this season, when we confront the hard truth of our sinfulness, signs of grace abound. We have several weeks of the Lenten journey still to walk. We are not yet done with self-examination and repentance. Our Lenten fast is not over. But even here, grace awaits us at this holy table where we receive manna from heaven to sustain us in the wilderness. The true bread, which gives life to the world. So rejoice, I say, rejoice!