

## Can there be Joy during Lent?

Isaiah 12:1-6

March 31, 2019

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 12: “the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

For the middle of Lent, we have a collection of rather happy texts this week. Father and sons are reunited in the Gospel lesson, in the epistle Paul declares us new creations in Christ. Then there’s this Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, declaring words of praise to God on a day of thanksgiving.

There’s a reason for these upbeat proclamations: the fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally called “Laetare,” Latin for “be joyful.” These Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Easter aren’t part of the forty days of Lent: they are Sundays “in Lent,” but not “of Lent.” And even in this penitential season, while there’s still some time to go before the Festival of the Resurrection, the people of God take time to be joyful as they await that day which is to come.

The people of Isaiah’s time were waiting — waiting for deliverance from their enemies who seemed about to overrun them. The book of Isaiah is full of warnings to the wicked, both Gentiles and the people of Israel. But in the first twelve chapters, Isaiah spends quite a bit of time telling the people they are not forsaken—telling them that the promised Savior will come. He points them to that future coming and tells them that He is their hope, even now in these troubled times.

As chapter 11 draws to a close, as the people fear that they will be wiped off the face of the earth by the mighty Assyrian army, Isaiah declares to the people, “And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of His people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt” (Isaiah 11:16). He points them to the Exodus, when Moses led the people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. And what did they do once they crossed the sea and Pharaoh’s armies were washed away? They sang a song praise to God, a song that declared, “The LORD is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation.” They still had a long way to go to the Promised Land, but they stopped and sang along the way. They did so with good reason: far from the Promised Land in the wilderness, the Lord who had delivered them was present to protect them, and He would not leave His people. In our text, Isaiah proclaims the same hope to his despairing hearers: although things look terribly dire, the Lord is faithful. And even though there’s a long time to go before the Lord delivers them, he declares a song of praise for them to sing along the way.

So it is with you and me: along the way, even in the midst of Lent, we sing this song of joy as we await Easter and the Festival of the Resurrection. But more than that, we know this: life in

this world is Lent. It is a time of penitence, of fasting and temptation. It is a time of darkness in a sinful world as we await not just a remembrance of Christ's resurrection, but our own resurrection and the life of the world to come.

In other words, dear friends, this song of joy is for you along the way as you await deliverance to heaven.

So it begins: "I will give thanks to You, O LORD, for though You were angry with me, Your anger turned away, that You might comfort me." There's your Gospel, right there. God was angry with you, and rightly so because of your sin. But God is not angry with you anymore. Why? Because God has turned His anger away from you. You see, because He is just, He must punish sin: He cannot just turn His anger from you and direct it into outer space. The sinner must face judgment.

That is why this verse gets you to the Gospel: God turned His anger away from you and turned it toward His Son.

The epistle makes this most certainly clear when it says: "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God made Jesus to be sin for our sake. That's where God turned His anger for our sin—onto His Son at the cross. Because Christ was the object of God's wrath and the bearer of our sin, we are now forgiven. We are now righteous and live as the beloved children of God. Rather than condemn us, He comforts us.

In fact, check out the news of the following verse, which echoes the song from the Exodus: "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD God is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation." The verse states the astonishing truth twice. It is not just that "God has caused my salvation" or "God has sent my salvation," but that "God is my salvation." He is your salvation because He is the One sacrificed on the cross for you. Where you were powerless against sin and death, the LORD God is your strength, and He has defeated sin and death. He has destroyed the power of all that would leave you unrighteous and corrupted, and He has given you His righteousness and life. He is your salvation, He is your strength, and He is your song. In fact, this verse echoes Psalm 118:14, which says, "The LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation." And how does that song continue in Psalm 118? It sings out, "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD" (Psalm 118:17). It declares, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:22-23).

That is the song of joy that you sing in this life of Lent. God has turned His anger away from you. He is your salvation, your strength and your song. And therefore, "with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." In keeping with the reference to the Exodus, Isaiah reminds us that this world is the wilderness as we make our way to the Promised Land of heaven. Water is necessary for life. More than once in the wilderness, the people had no water and would have

died were it not for the Lord. But the Lord provided water in the wilderness to keep the people alive on the journey to the Promised Land. So also He keeps you alive by His means of grace, as Jesus declares in John 4, “whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

God is not angry with you. He has turned His anger away from you, and now He comforts you. He is your salvation, your strength and your song.

It is no small thing that God is not angry with you. The world still lives under the wrath of God. It is not because God desires it, for—as we heard last week—He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but would have them turn and live. They are under God’s wrath because their sins are still bound to them, because they have not yet repented and been saved.

Deep down inside, sinners know that they are under the wrath of God: it is part of the Law that is written on their hearts, part of what their conscience whispers. There will be those who respond by being angry at God, which wouldn’t make sense if they didn’t think God was already angry at them in the first place. There are those who have reached despair, who are well aware of their guilt and mortality but don’t see any way to redemption: such are very aware of God’s wrath, but not at all of His grace and life. There are those who count on their good works to appease God’s wrath, but that is hardly a guarantee to soothe the conscience. There are those who dismiss the existence of God, but still know they’re going to get crushed eventually, anyway.

And whoever is afraid of death is very aware of the wrath of God, even if they don’t attribute it to Him. The wages of sin is death—death is the judgment upon the sinner. And everybody in this world lives in the shadow of death.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis described the curse of frozen Narnia as “always winter, never Christmas.” For those who sense God’s wrath but do not know His salvation, life is always Lent, never Easter. Always wilderness, never Promised Land. Only thirst, not wells of salvation. Only death, not life, awaits.

That’s a world in need of Good News.

Thus our Old Testament lesson continues: “Give thanks to the LORD, call upon His name, make known His deeds among the peoples, proclaim that His name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for He has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth.”

This is the privilege given to the Church, to the people of God—to proclaim the glorious deeds of God. We proclaim Christmas to a world that knows only winter, and Easter to people who know only Lent. To those who know only guilt, we declare forgiveness in Christ. To those who see funerals as the end, we proclaim eternal life. For those who fear the wrath of God, we declare

that God has turned His wrath away from them onto Christ; and not only that, but now God turns His face to shine upon them, to be gracious unto them.

That is the news that we are given by God to proclaim: freedom in Christ from sin and death. And that is why the devil works overtime to persecute this proclamation, to make confessing the faith seem like a burden instead of a privilege. Satan wants people under the wrath of God, not forgiven; so he will try to shut up the Church. He will try to make us fear the wrath of man more than the wrath of God, to value our lives and livelihoods more than the eternal life of others. That is why confessing the faith is difficult, but the difficulty is the devil's lie. We get to proclaim life that raises the dead. That is the new song that we sing.

It is not easy. We'll believe that the burden is too heavy, and we'll need to repent of that often. The devil's temptations are many, and the world does not hear the news gladly. That is why we come to church and sing the song to each other, to encourage each other that God's wrath is turned away, to comfort one another with God's strength and salvation. Furthermore, we declare that we are not alone; that is the conclusion of the song of Isaiah 12: "Shout and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." As it was true for the people of the Exodus, so it is true for you. You are not alone, and you are certainly not forsaken. The Holy One of Israel is great in your midst: not with mighty acts of power visible to the human eye. Rather, He works the great miracle of resurrection in baptism, so that eternal life is already yours. He works the great miracle of forgiveness and faith within you by the speaking of His Word, by the singing of the new song of the Gospel. The Holy One comes in the midst of you—body, blood and all—in with and under bread and wine.

The Holy One—Jesus Christ—is in your midst, with His song of joy for this life of Lent. He is your comfort, your strength and your song. He is your salvation, because He suffered the wrath of God for your sin when it was turned upon Him, and He rose again to give you life. That is the song of joy for this life of Lent, that you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.