

REJOICING IN FREEDOM

Hear that which has been written, and chosen for proclamation for this “Laetare – Rejoice!” Sunday, as the Church once again breaks her fast during the 40-day countdown to the Resurrection of our Lord:

*Rejoice, O sterile one, the one not bearing child;
Break loose and cry out, the one not having labor pains;
Because more are the children of the desolate one –
greater than the one having the husband!¹*

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Once again, in a season given for reflection and repentance, a week of rejoicing breaks through. With a bit more than half the days of fasting behind us, we behold the sights and hear the calls to pause in repentant joy. For centuries, this fourth week of Lent has shone forth with rose to symbolize rejoicing. To that end, both the readings (which begin with the call to Rejoice!), and the color of the week are given to call us to remember that we, the Church, are the Rose of Sharon.²

Yes, we know there is a beautiful hymn that equates Christ with that Rose. We shall leave that discussion for another day.³ For on this day, in the Rose of Sharon that is the Christian Church, the readings point us to the Church’s calling God’s people into His Church that He might give them, you, His good and gracious gifts! From the Laetare Propers of the Day (the changeable readings) the first words which the Church offered back to her Lord in symphony (with one voice) may be rendered like this:

I was glad when they were saying to me: “To House YHWH let us go!”⁴

Did you notice, that as you spoke words resembling those, that the men who have been called to serve Christ for and to you entered into His Sanctuary?

We remained in the sacrificial position, offering with you, the Gloria Patri. We all voiced the Name of God with which He has marked us in Holy Baptism. Some of us

¹ Galatians 4:27.

² Engelbrecht, Edward A. ed. *The Lutheran Study Bible*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, “Song of Songs” 2:1, n.1069.

³ “Lo, How A Rose E.er Blooming” *Lutheran Service Book*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 2006, 359.

⁴ *Psalm 122:1*.

bowed slightly at the waist in reverence for the powerful work He has done in calling us His own children through our Mother the Church. Such actions in the Lord's public services stand as mighty witnesses to our worldly culture which reduces all to the familiar. We know, and thereby confess by words and actions, into Whose Presence we have entered. The Creator of the Universe has called us into His House. He invites us to His Table in the united confession of the Faith. He does so that He might offer us, on account of Jesus Who died to present us as His pure Bride, the fruits of His victory – forgiveness, and from that life now, and salvation forever! Hear again as the Lord God Almighty speaks to the One Whom He has called to be His Rose of the fertile coastal plain of life in a world full of death:

In time of favor I have answered you, and in day of Salvation I have helped you; and I have kept you and I have given you for covenant people, to cause to establish land to cause to apportion inheritances desolate.⁵

The time of God's favor came when He, through the blessed Virgin Mary (the third person, with the Church and Christ Jesus, who may on occasion bear the title, "Rose of Sharon") answered His faithful people. They had been waiting through centuries from Isaiah's prophecy for God's fulfillment of His promise for the Day of Salvation. That day came, when Mary, and her betrothed husband, were faithful to the angel's command to name her firstborn son, Yeshua, "Salvation." From His conception through His birth, into His sinless life, into becoming the sin-bearer of the world's sins, into death in your sins, "Salvation," Jesus, lived His Name. From the cross, as He breathed His last, He watered with His life-blood the seed which has flourished – in times of good, and in times of persecution – into the Rose of Sharon into which God has grafted you.

Today, again, He calls you to be His covenant people. Soon, He will celebrate His New Covenant meal with you. It is you for whom He died. It is you for whom He lives.

This He still does from His Word, in fulfillment of His promises. He desires that

⁵ Isaiah 49:8.

you might believe, and know, and grasp in the very center of your being that His fulfillment of His Word in Christ is all His wonderful work – for you who deserve it not.

You should know that. You have had 22 days of Lent to reflect on how unworthy you are of God’s gracious gifts. The coming last 12 days of Lent are annually given to lead us into God’s Judgment, Passion, Triumphal Entrance and establishment of His New Covenant in His blood. The Last two drive home the price He paid to water His fertile plain, His Rose of Sharon, that you might thrive in Him. For years, we have experienced the reality that those among us who really desire to be attuned to humanity’s lack of merit to elicit good or effect our own salvation before God will make diligent efforts to attend as many Holy Week services as possible.

Even so, the Word calls out to us who are about to relive – across the centuries – the reality of God’s sacrifice for sinners. We are turned, for seven days beginning today, from reflecting on our sinfulness, to the sinlessness God grants to us who are His beloved and well-tended Rose. God, through St. Paul, calls out to our Mother, the Church, and to all whom He has birthed through Her over the generations:

*Rejoice, O sterile one, the one not bearing child;
Break loose and cry out, the one not having labor pains;
Because more are the children of the desolate one –
greater than the one having the husband!*⁶

The Holy Spirit moved the Apostle to record those words to have them first declared to congregations in Galatia who were being tempted away from rejoicing in freedom given by God’s Gospel to laboring in bondage under God’s Law. As is true for many of the teaching doctrines of the New Testament, those words were not first composed by the one-time Pharisee. Remember, he had had a call and commission of the Old Covenant Church leaders to enforce God’s Law on those who were being liberated by His Good News. He who was once, “blinded by the Light,” (don’t drift off into that ballad, you Boomers), had been illumined by Truth. He saw the original Scripture and

⁶ Galatians 4:27.

was shown its meaning for congregations under persecution from within and without.

That dear ones, in Christ, means that the ancient truth that St. Paul quotes is for the Church in this place. According to the extant pastoral record of Baptisms at Catalina Lutheran Church, this congregation was barren of new births in the Faith from August 16, 1997 (age: 17 months) through February 13, 2000 (age: 82 years). The Lord was doing a “reset” among us during that time of sterility. (There may have been other times before that where we were a long-term barren womb of the Faith, but we have no complete pastoral record from that era).

If the pastor then would have used more of the wisdom God grants through His Word, and the gifts received in the laying on of hands, we would have been moved sooner to hearing God’s Word through the more ancient series of readings we hear now. Yet, the pastor then needed to learn, to ache, to suffer, and to be driven into the Word for comfort and trust in God’s promises. He needed to walk in part in the way St. Paul trod, and keep calling out to those who would be turned away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ and back to the Law for salvation. Now that pastor reinforces the Lord’s call and promise to those faithful whom God has brought forth from this once-barren assembly these words:

*Rejoice, O sterile one, the one not bearing child;
Break loose and cry out, the one not having labor pains;
Because more are the children of the desolate one –
greater than the one having the husband!⁷*

In the last millennium year, after the new birth drought at the end of the 1990s, God began again to add His Name souls whom He grafted into His Church through this congregation. (Understand, we pastors have no command of the Lord to make a census of His work among us since the turn of the millennium. And neither of us wants to fall into any of King David’s recorded sins). Suffice it to say that since AD 2000 God has added names to His in this place every year, except 2012. (That year God used Adult

⁷ Galatians 4:27.

Confirmations to grow His Church here). God continues opening wombs here, and by His grace and mercy, He will add His Name to more souls this year. That is His work.

Ours is to be found faithful. At a Circuit Winkel during this congregation's barren years, local LCMS pastors were commenting about a Tucson WELS pastor who had just departed his pastorate. A statement was made that the congregation in which he was Christ's servant held the same number of souls on her membership roles as when he had arrived 25 years before. Some pastor asked a question like this, "How must he have felt after a quarter of century to have left with no growth?" Others chimed in indicating how depressing that might have been.

The new pastor in the group, who had resolved in himself to keep his mouth shut for his first three meetings, called out in his mind this answer: "Faithful! The pastor must have felt faithful!" In Tucson, where an average congregation member stayed in a congregation 2.8 years, that congregation must have sent forth at least nine times her current membership into either the Church triumphant, or the Church in other earthly places. That old departing pastor had reason for rejoicing – for it appeared that he had been found faithful in doing the Lord's work.

How about you? Are you being found faithful in the Lord's work? That means your work in the holy vocations to which He has called you. In particular, today you are called to rejoice with respect to being an hearer of God's Word.

Recent research reports indicate that just over half of those who self-identify as "Christian" think that it is not needful, nor even necessary, to attend the Lord's Services. Some 40 percent say they "find God elsewhere."⁸ (Is He lost?) Others indicate that "regular" Church attendance is considered to be found in a Nave somewhere twice per month. Think about that..., if you had chosen to make this one of the Sundays you miss this month, you would have missed the joy that is emphasized by God in His readings today!

⁸ <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/661-americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church#.VttEG8c0mi4>

If you have been barren in your hearing of God's Word, in the regular (weekly and weakly) reception of His gifts, Repent! Christ died to bring you forgiveness – even from that of violating the meaning of the Third Commandment. God is calling you from following the way of the son of Hagar, of Mount Sinai. Without turning this proclamation of the conviction, condemnation and killing of the Law into a Bible study, know that that Mountain stood between God's ancient faithful and the promised land. From the reception of God's Law on Mount Sinai, only two men, Caleb and Joshua, entered into the promised Land.⁹ All the rest, about a million souls whom God had, in His grace, led from slavery into Egypt, had died under slavery to the Holy Law.

If those illustrations from the Word of God are news to you, return to the Word of the Lord. He calls you to rejoice in hearing more of it in His services to you. He offers you five services here and at the Campus Christian Center in the average week. Receive and study God's Word in the Bible studies He gives to you out of this congregation. Such are not offered to sell you anything. Rather, they are a reflection of faithfulness to God's Word to give you the joy that endures – namely, that which comes from the proclamation of "Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of your sins!"

Yet, what if you don't want to be in this assembly more that a few times a month, or year? Perhaps you think there are hypocrites here. Yes, we are here. Maybe there are those in the Church, either here, or the wider Church who tempt you to follow the ways of the world, to look to Law, or feelings, or anything else for your salvation. The end of the Galatians reading for today is one of the strongest apologetics – defenses – for pulpit and altar separation among the congregations of other bodies that call themselves "Lutheran." There have always been those in the Church who fall under the Lord's condemnation:

*Cast out the slave woman and the son of her;
for definitely not will the son of the slave woman inherit*

⁹ cf. Nu. 14:24, 26:65 etc.

*with the son of the free woman.*¹⁰

Take heart, that declares that the Church has always had the same types of temptations. Paul was moved to reach all the way back to the Book of Genesis (21:9ff) for that quote of reassurance to congregations under persecution from those who were supposed to be in the Church! There have always, and there will be ever until the Last Day, those who are visibly in the Church who wish to turn God's people away from His Word to their own. Often they use emotions, feelings and human compassion to try to turn others to their other than Gospel ways to the God.

Today we have also heard of the joy of those who were were satisfied by Jesus. They had been filled by Jesus. Thousands who had been following Jesus then wanted forcibly seize Him to make Him King. They wanted Him to be their, "Free Bread God."

But, in the Christ of the Scriptures, they are not you, His Rose of Sharon. You are those who even today, in Lent, are found rejoicing in freedom. You look to the cross. There you behold your liberation from all forms of Law, and good works, deeds, thoughts and emotions for your salvation. You look down from the cross, through the silver flower-filled chalice, and see the Bread of Life – of forgiveness and strengthening. Here is the real God – veiled for your protection. Here is the Creator of Life, sustaining you in this life and into eternity. Here you find fulfillment on earth of these words of God:

*Therefore, O brothers, not do we remain of the slave woman children, but of the free woman!*¹¹

You heard those words in their original word order. The emphasis is on the words, "therefore," and "free woman." The first word shows that this is a conclusion drawn from the children of the Rose of Sharon – our Mother the Church. That means that they are those who inherit God's promises. The Rose is the free woman, the True Church, whose children you are by virtue of God's adopting you in Christ Jesus. Rejoice!

¹⁰ Galatians 4:30.

¹¹ Galatians 4:31.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Lent IV *Laetare* (LSB One-year series)

TLH Introit Psalm 122:1 (Isaiah 66:10); Isaiah 49:8-13; Galatians 4:21-31; John 6:1-15; Psalm 132:8-18

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Solī Deo Glōria