

**Fourth
Sunday
of Lent**

Year B



FIRST READING
2 Chronicles 36:14–16, 19–23

PSALM
Psalm 137:1–6

SECOND READING
Ephesians 2:4–10

GOSPEL
John 3:14–21

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PRAYER

Psalm 137:1–6

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth,
saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling
to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

READING THE WORD

First Reading

2 Chronicles 36:14–16, 19–23

All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had consecrated in Jerusalem. The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by

his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy. They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up.”

Second Reading
Ephesians 2:4–10

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Gospel
John 3:14–21

Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn

the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

HEARING THE WORD

“Rejoice in God’s Salvation!”

The fourth Sunday of Lent, is also known as “the Sunday of Rejoicing” or “Laetare Sunday”. In the middle of Lent, which is a serious and somber time for fasting and prayer, the faithful are called to celebrate and rejoice in God’s salvation, in order to focus all their efforts on repentance and restoration, in the perspective of that being the ultimate goal of Christian life.

The first reading comes from the Book of Chronicles which contains a sweeping account of the entire Israelite history, starting with Adam, the first human being, and ending with the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile in 586 BC. One might be tempted to see this history as a tale of disaster. The author of Chronicles concluded that these tragedies occurred because of the breaking of the covenant which left the nation exposed to its pow-

erful enemies, with predictable disastrous effects.

Yet, despite the nations’ infidelity, God did not abandon his people permanently. On the contrary, for the Chronicler, the future is full of hope, because God bound himself to the people with the faithful covenantal love. It is God’s commitment, and not the nation’s failures, that will determine the people’s destiny. Jeremiah knew this when he prophesized that the Babylonian enslavement would come to an end. Historically, his prophecies came true in 539 BC, when the Persian king, Cyrus, overthrew the Babylonian rule and issued his famous edict freeing the captives with the specific permission to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple.

This decree of Cyrus announcing “liberation” was the good news to the people of Israel. Undoubtedly, it was a sign of God’s salvific intentions which remained unchanged. Thus, the Chronicler interprets Israel’s tragic history not as a tale of disaster but rather a story of hope. Concluding his account with the edict of Cyrus, the author proclaims God’s enduring commitment to the project of salvation, and he declares God’s salvific purpose which even the people’s unfaithfulness could not frustrate.

In the second reading, Paul focuses on how those who having joined themselves to the Risen Lord, have already been made alive in

Christ and are therefore “already saved”. This text is part of a larger section of Ephesians (1:3 – 3:21) focused on the “mystery of Christ”, which the author understands as God’s eternal plan to bring the Jews and the Gentiles together into a single household of God, the new people of God. Through Christ, God has executed this plan of salvation. For Paul, salvation is a completely gratuitous gift of God to all believers, regardless of their ethnic identity. Salvation means union with God already in the present life, but in view of full salvation in the future, after the resurrection. Anyone can partake in this salvation, provided one has faith in Jesus, who has made this salvation possible through his death and resurrection. Paul emphatically states this, saying, “by grace you have been saved through faith”. Paul’s message to the Ephesians is, therefore, a jubilant proclamation that salvation now becomes available to all, without any distinctions or discrimination, on the sole basis of faith in God’s Son. Paul emphasizes that this was God’s intention from the very beginning, and was fulfilled in and through Jesus. Those who believe in him can already celebrate and rejoice in their salvation.

In the Gospel reading, John presents the mission of the Son of God as an expression of God’s love, intent on the redemption of humanity and the offering of eternal life to believers. This view is enshrined in one of the most celebrat-

ed verses of John's Gospel, "for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life". Today's reading comes from an extensive, theological exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3:1-21). Nicodemus, a Jewish scholar and a Pharisee, was a perfect conversation partner for Jesus who intended to discuss God's reasons for sending his Son, that is himself, into the world. The concluding part of this conversation, read today, reveals that God's purpose for Jesus' mission was the salvation of the world. John understands salvation as the gift of eternal life, a theme that recurs throughout the conversation. He also wants to explain God's reasons for, and the means through which, this gift of eternal life comes to the people.

God's reasons are explicitly stated by John in the words, "God so loved the world". The gift of eternal life is offered because of God's love for humanity. The way through which this gift was offered is revealed by allusion to the story from Numbers 21:4-9. There, the Israelites journeying through the wilderness grumbled against the Lord and his servant Moses, completely forgetting the goodness of the Lord and his constant provision that nourished them in the desert. This blatant disregard and ingratitude towards God brings the fiery serpents, whose poisonous bites bring death, into the midst of the community. When Moses interceded for the unfaithful people,

God ordered him to make a bronze image of a poisonous serpent and raise it high on a pole. Looking at this elevated object, representing death, brought healing and rescue from the poison. Citing this story, John ingeniously alludes to Jesus' cross. In the desert, the bronze serpent – the tool of death – became the source of healing. On Calvary, Jesus lifted on the cross – the tool of death – becomes the giver of eternal life. God's salvation came through the cross. Jesus' "lifting up" was a direct reference to the divine saving act. Again, the human response to this divine act is believing in Jesus, the saviour acting on behalf of the loving author of life – God.

The rejoicing character of this Sunday is perfectly justified by its readings. The first reading, appealing to the edict of Cyrus, declares that God's salvific purpose would not be undermined by human infidelity. Neither can his faithfulness be frustrated by human unfaithfulness. Paul proclaims that this salvific purpose has been accomplished in the present time by Jesus and that it can be already enjoyed by faith in anticipation of its fullness in the future. The Gospel reading reveals the depth of God's saving love for humanity revealed on the cross, where Jesus was lifted up for the salvation of the world. All that God has done through his Son was intended to give eternal life to his people, a life that can be had through faith. Because of all of this, Christians, unlike the psalmist who lamented in the ex-

ile – "by the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept" – can rejoice – laetare! – as God's salvation draws near.

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Right in the middle of Lent we celebrate the Sunday of rejoicing. Rejoicing is a natural response to what makes us happy. Today's liturgy identifies, and invites us to reflect on, several reasons why we should feel happy and rejoice, even as we prepare to commemorate Jesus' passion and death.

The first and main reason for our rejoicing is that God has extended his gift of salvation, first promised to the patriarchs, to us. Jesus, God's son, came into the world on a mission from the Father to make eternal life possible for all who welcome him with faith. He offered us the possibility of eternal life regardless of nationality, race, gender and social status. While we prepare to commemorate Jesus' passion, we must always remember that the cross is not the tool of death but the tool of life. The Gospel illustrates that magnificently bringing in the image of the snake whose bites were bringing death. Yet, the same deadly snake became a tool of life. This beautifully applies to Jesus' cross – the tool of shame and torture became the means of life and salvation. In our journey through life we frequently experience "snake bites". These are the difficult and often threatening experi-

ences of suffering and adversity imposed on us by the circumstances of life or by other people. These make us “die a little every day”. However, today we are reminded to rejoice despite these afflictions, because we know that when we face these with faith, they lose their power to harm us permanently. Because of God’s gift of salvation, delivered through Jesus’ cross, no evil power in this life can separate us from God’s love that leads to salvation. This is indeed a reason to rejoice!

Our second major reason to rejoice is that God’s love is gratuitous and permanent. We have done nothing to deserve God’s grace, love and salvation. This is a liberating thought because it means that we do not have to worry about doing something special or being perfect to receive these blessings. They are simply there for us to have. Even more so, they are always there! The first reading shows that despite the nation’s failures, God’s promise remained unchanged. Today, the cause for our rejoicing is the realization that, even though like the Israelites we often fall short of living out our Christian ideals and are weighed down by our failures and sins, God’s pledge of salvation will never be withdrawn. Our destiny is full of hope, because our God is faithful and determined to sustain us despite our imperfections and sinfulness. We have a Father who awaits us with extended arms, holding in them the gift of life in a gesture of offering to those who wish

to reach for it, even if they happen to be the prodigal sons or daughters.

We reach for this gift through an act of faith – trustful reliance on Christ and what he did for us. Rejoicing in the middle of Lent is about reminding ourselves why we observe this season in the first place. We do so to train ourselves in faith and trust in God’s offer of salvation so that we might orient our life properly towards eternal life. Knowing that this is our future, and contemplating Christ on the cross as the source of eternal life, we indeed have every reason to rejoice even as we journey through Lent, and indeed through life, often full of “snake bites”. Since we have a faithful God and Father we rejoice, because these bites are not deadly!

PROVERB

*“The dance
that will be interesting
does not have to wait
for the drums.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

What in my life gives me a sense of true joy? Are any of these things of a spiritual nature?

What do I hope and wait for in the long run? Are these expectations in any way re-

lated to God and what he promises?

Response to God:

My prayer during this week will be that of thanksgiving for God’s salvation offered to me through his Son. I will thank him daily for the grace of knowing him and his purposes for me.

Response to your World:

During this week I will make a conscious effort to convey a sense of joy and hope for the future to all I meet. As a group, we will organize a faith-sharing session. We will share the positive and joyful experiences of God’s saving grace, particularly those experienced amid sufferings.

PRAYER

*God of mercy,
we thank you
for your faithfulness
even when we fall away from you.
May our failings,
we beseech you,
never quench your love for us.
Increase our faith
in Jesus Christ
and make us worthy to rejoice
in the fullness of our salvation.
We ask this
through our Lord
Jesus Christ your Son,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit
one God forever and ever.
Amen.*