

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Some of our visitors today, even the Lutherans, might be wondering about the rose-colored paraments on the altar today. Traditionally, this Sunday was called *Laetare*, a Latin word that means to rejoice. A Sunday's name would come from the first words of the Introit. Today, our Introit doesn't mention rejoicing, but surely it is a confident confession: "*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*" Surely, our answer is a confident: "We fear no one, for the Lord is on our side." And we would heed David's exhortation as he ends his Psalm: "*Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD*" (Ps. 27:14).

Indeed, I hope we sang it with rejoicing, for the Lord has supplied to us such wonderful promises today. I'm talking about the Scripture texts before us today. The Gospel contains perhaps the best known verse in all of Scripture. Christians can recite it. One need only say: John 3:16, and the words come to mind. It speaks of love and gift and eternal life.

The Epistle lesson contains another favorite verse, at least for Lutherans. "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*" Moreover, the Epistle as a whole speaks of the same things: love and gift and being saved to eternal life. These are all reasons to rejoice.

The Old Testament lesson may not be as well known to you, and it may be a bit more of a riddle. But Jesus gives us the key to understanding that little incident out in the wilderness. It turns out that hidden in that story also is God's love and gift and life.

But before we get to the rejoicing, there must be an acknowledgment of our need. Before the Good News of what God does, these texts highlight our ways. And they're nothing to brag about. Rather they call us to repentance and to reliance on the Lord.

Beginning in the Old Testament, we see how the people complained. They spoke against God and His prophet. Dissatisfied with the provisions that the Lord had given them — miraculous bread in the morning and meat at night; even water from a rock — they complained. It wasn't enough for them.

They weren't hungry; they had water; why the Lord even provided that their clothes and shoes didn't wear out (Deut. 29:5). Yet, the people grumbled in unthankfulness — might we even say unbelief? — so that the Lord afflicted them with fiery serpents. It brought them to their knees in repentance: "*We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you.*"

Our plight is even worse than that, the Scriptures tell us. We are conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity (Ps. 51:5), spiritually “*dead in the trespasses and sins*” passed down from parents to children ever since Adam and Eve’s garden transgression. As St. Paul says, “*sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin*”; “*because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man*” (Rom. 5:12, 17).

Still worse, in the Gospel, Jesus warns us about the darkness of unbelief, about hating the light who has come into the world, Jesus Christ, our Lord, and about the evil works and wicked acts that result from loving this darkness. Unbelief means a “*mind [set] on the flesh*” and that means not only death, but also “[*hostility*] to God” (Rom. 8:6-7). Unbelief means “*friendship with the world,*” and that makes us an “*enemy of God*” (James 4:4).

Jesus is clear: unbelief is what condemns, not this sin or that trespass, but not believing “*in the name of the only Son of God.*” Repent! Stop your disbelieving; hear His word. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*”

You got it? Believe in God; believe in His love; believe in His Son; believe in His grace; believe in the forgiveness of sins; believe in salvation; believe in eternal life.

God knew the trouble we were in from the moment we fell. Adam hid himself, but He couldn’t hide from God. And so God promised: “I will send a Savior, the offspring of a woman, to crush the serpent’s head. To be sure, it will cost my Son, the Son of Man. His heel will be bruised; He will be lifted up unto death for the world.”

“O love, how deep, how broad, how high, Beyond all thought and fantasy, That God, the Son of God, should take Our mortal form for mortals’ sake!” (LSB544) Oh yes. God’s love was deep and broad and high; God loved us so much. He sent His own Son into our flesh. But it’s more than that. “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13). Jesus considered us friends and laid down His life for us. This is what love is: “*not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the [atoning sacrifice] for our sins*” (1 John 4:10).

And yet, “so much” not what the “so” means in “*For God so loved the world ....*” It’s not about the magnitude of God’s love — so much, but the manner of God’s love — in this way. “Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ....” An alternate translation is offered in the ESV, and I would say it is better, because makes it clearer: “*For this is how God loved the world.*” How? What did Jesus just say? By being lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness. Remember, the Israelites looked at that serpent

on the pole and were saved. So also we. As we look to the Son of Man, God's Son, lifted up on the cross, we recognize "here is God's love, the perfect gift coming down from above, the light of the world coming down from the Father of lights (James 1:17), offering Himself for us." We look to Him "For us by wickedness betrayed, For us, in crown of thorns arrayed, He bore the shameful cross and death; For us He gave His dying breath." We look to Him lifted up, and believe in Him, and we are forgiven of our sins; we are saved; we have eternal life.

It's precisely why Jesus came; not as an exemplar for us, but to save us; not to condemn us, but to save us. St. Paul said: "*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*" (1 Tim. 1:15) — us sinners.

Isn't that fantastic? Something to rejoice about? We ungrateful, grumbling sinners are forgiven in Christ? We who are born spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins are made alive in Christ, made alive as a gift from God, reborn ... this time from above? And we know this rebirth happens in "*the washing of [rebirth] and renewal of the Holy Spirit*" (Tit. 3:5) that happens in Holy Baptism. We were privileged this past Thursday in chapel to witness God's grace wash over one of our First Graders, Royce Bolden — forgiveness and rescued from death and given eternal salvation! What a cause for rejoicing! We rejoice that we who are incapable of keeping the law of God don't have to try to labor for our salvation — salvation is by God's grace; it's a gift; not by our works; received by faith.

What extraordinary Good News for sinners we've heard today: "*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 this is how God loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*" "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him ... For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Indeed, if there is anything to boast about, it must surely be in the Lord alone (1 Cor. 1:31); and on this *Laetare* Sunday, we surely have much to rejoice in: in these young voices singing the Good News of Jesus, in you families who have gathered with us, but especially in God's love in Christ Jesus, in His gift of salvation, and in eternal life through faith in Christ. Let us "*rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice*" (Phil. 4:4).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.