

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Lent Year “B”

*God, who is Rich in Mercy*

March 13-14, 2021- Laetare Sunday

Readings: 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21

To people who value precision, it will come as no surprise that the exact mid-point of Lent occurred this past Thursday. Still, this weekend’s designation as *Laetare* Sunday traditionally marks the mid-point in our annual Lenten journey. Why do we mark time this way? It seems counterintuitive to celebrate reaching the mid-point of a period of penance and fasting. We don’t celebrate the mid-point of college semester exams or take a moment of joy halfway through our Saturday chores at home. No, we just power on through until we are done.

But perhaps there is more wisdom in this mid-point exercise than at first glance. Laetare Sunday originates from the Introit that you heard as we processed in for Mass. “Laetare Jerusalem” – “Rejoice, O Jerusalem”. That Introit is taken from the Book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 66:10. Those who have been in sorrow are to rejoice in gladness.

We observe a few subtle differences liturgically. We have beautiful flowers on the altar, we have Rose color vestments– humor me, please do not call them pink. Rose is midway between red and magenta on the color wheel–it is not pink! It is a muted color, (not bright), fitting for the season. Pope Leo IX already called it an “ancient institution” when in 1051, he carried a golden rose when returning from celebrating Mass on this Sunday.<sup>1</sup> In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI he presented a gold rose to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.<sup>2</sup>

It is easy to fall into the trap of missing the forest for the trees, forgetting the big picture. We focus solely on our Lenten resolutions and forget to consider why we are doing them in the first place. We are rejoicing today because we are now closer to Easter than we are to Ash Wednesday!

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Leo IX called it an “ancient institution” back in 1051 A.D.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. The Compass, Diocese of Green Bay newspaper, March 20, 2010.

As we look in anticipation towards our salvation, the reason for our joy becomes clearer. Noted liturgical scholar Pius Parsch wrote: “The Church now chooses the loveliest flower of spring, the early rose, and brings it into God’s house and into the liturgy. The rose is the image of the soul in grace. The queen of flowers, it blossoms on its stem of thorns.”<sup>3</sup>

Liturgical symbolism aside, from the perspective of human psychology, we need a moment’s respite in the middle of anything that is arduous. The Church balances days of penance with days of celebration. Incidentally, we have an unusual circumstance this week, as the Solemnity of St. Joseph falls on a Friday. However, it is not a day of fasting this year; solemnities are never days of fasting; consider it a liturgical “snow day,” a freebie!

Still, we have penance and work ahead of us, and this is the season of mercy. I urge you to remain committed to your resolutions and to make plans for a sacramental confession. The title of St. John Paul II’s second encyclical, “Rich in Mercy,” was taken from today’s second reading, where St. Paul beautifully describes the depths of God’s love for us. In this encyclical, he rhetorically asks:

“Did not Christ say that our Father, who ‘sees in secret,’ is always waiting for us to have recourse to Him in every need and always waiting for us to study His mystery: the mystery of the Father and His love?”<sup>4</sup>

Even in the midst of reflecting upon our sins and our need for greater spiritual discipline, we ought to recall this. It is all part of the process, a “both-and” more than an “either-or” proposition. May we never doubt God’s mercy, which extends well beyond the door of the confessional.

Ephesians prays that God “might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” Today, we pause to reflect upon that kindness, and rejoice in the salvation that draws ever nearer.

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Pius Parsch, *Seasons of Grace: New Meditations for Sundays and Feastdays*, pp. 167-168, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in Misericordia*, 1980; paragraph #2