

Homily based on the readings from March 10, 2024 (2 Chronicles 36.14-16, 19-23; Ephesians 2.4-10; John 3.14-21)

It is fair to say that life does not always work out as we would hope or expect. All of us, if we have lived long enough, have had our share of sadnesses and disappointments: family members who have died too soon, terminal illnesses, financial difficulties, professional frustrations, marital discord. In some way or other, our lives have not unfolded according to the plans we would have laid out.

Looking around the world, we see the same type of desolation – but on an inconceivably vaster scale. Entire nations have had to endure pestilence, famine, drought, and even foreign invasion. In the United States, we can point to traumatic events such as the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, and September 11th, but many other countries have had to deal with far worse. Across the globe, countless generations have been forced to witness their homelands being ransacked, despoiled, partitioned, and dismembered. Having lost their homes and possessions,

many huddled masses have sought refuge here in the United States – indeed, many of us here today are their descendants.

Today's first reading is a poignant account of suffering on a national level. Around the year 600 BC, the Kingdom of Judah – the successor to the mighty kingdom ruled over by David and Solomon – was completely vanquished by the Babylonian Empire. The capital city of Jerusalem, along with its majestic temple, was utterly destroyed:

Their enemies burnt the house of God,  
tore down the walls of Jerusalem,  
set all its palaces afire,  
and destroyed all its precious objects.

Most of the surviving population was forced into exile, violently removed from the land God had given their ancestors.

The problem here was not just that one particular nation was overcome by another. The problem was that God's chosen people – the people he

had brought out of Egypt, the people he had sustained for forty years in the wilderness, the people to whom he had granted the Promised Land – lost what they believed they would possess for the rest of human history. The Jewish people *knew* they had already received God’s deliverance, yet somehow they still had to endure the agony of expulsion. Today’s psalm serves as a haunting lament for the losses they endured:

By the streams of Babylon

we sat and wept

when we remembered Zion.

Nevertheless, even within the course of today’s readings, we see this suffering come to a close. After seventy years, a new king – Cyrus the Persian – allowed the Jewish people to return to their homeland and ordered the reconstruction of the Temple. After a *lifetime* in exile, the Jewish people were finally able to return to the land of their forefathers.

So, besides a somewhat somber history lesson, what message can we take from today's readings? The point, which pertains to all of us, is that salvation is not usually a straight-line path from the baptismal font to the Pearly Gates. There are always setbacks and disappointments – even moments when we seem to be worse off than when we first started. Nevertheless – as long as we continue to trust in Jesus Christ – our place in the Heavenly Kingdom is guaranteed in the end.

As you have probably noticed, today is one of the two days of the year – one in Lent and one in Advent – when clergy have the option of wearing rose-colored vestments. Today, in particular, is known as *Rejoice Sunday* – or, in Latin, *Laetare Sunday*. The name actually comes from the entrance antiphon, [the chant we just heard at the opening of Mass]:

Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her.

Be joyful, all who were in mourning.

This verse stands in stark contrast to today's psalm. It serves as a jubilant reminder that – even though we still have a long and wearisome

road ahead of us – Easter’s arrival is inevitable. No matter how cold and grim the world around us appears, the rising sun will always dispel the darkness of despair. As Saint Paul reminds us:

[E]ven when we were dead in our transgressions,  
[God] brought us to life with Christ ... ,  
raised us up with him,  
and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus[.]

Regardless of what obstacles we encounter in this life, Jesus will always be waiting for us in the next. Even though the earthly Jerusalem was conquered and the Temple destroyed, God has prepared for us the *heavenly* Jerusalem – in which he himself is the Temple, in which he himself is the light. It is *that* hope – it is *that* promise – that serves as the everlasting source of our rejoicing.