

Laetare, the Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 2, 2008

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University Lutheran Chapel  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

## NEW JERUSALEM IN THE WILDERNESS

John 6:1-15

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our Introit today we prayed: “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all you who love her; that you may feed and be satisfied with the consolation of her bosom.” Jerusalem, the great city. It was meant to be a city of rejoicing, a city where God was found, a city where His Word and where faith prevailed. It was, after all the place to which Israel was headed as they wandered through the desert after leaving Egypt. It was the goal, the place where God would feed them the eternal manna of His Word and grace that they might be satisfied with His goodness.

But Jerusalem in the day of Jesus was not such a place. Jesus later laments the city as He approaches it on Palm Sunday crying out: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” And just before our Gospel lesson today He says to the Jews in Jerusalem: “You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. But I have a greater witness than John’s; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me... But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me.”

According to St. Matthew, John the Baptist had just been beheaded by Herod. The greatest prophet of the day, apart from Jesus Himself, had been rejected and his life had been taken from him. Jesus, of course, would be next. And it would not be Herod’s step-daughter, but Jerusalem that cried out for His blood. The Psalmist says: “I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go into the house of the LORD.” Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!” But when Jesus entered into those gates the citizens sought His life. And at last they took it.

But today, having heard of John’s death, Jesus would not go to the city, but sought a desolate place where He could be alone. And having crossed over the Sea of Galilee, He went up into a mountain with His disciples. But He would not be left alone, multitudes of people came out from all the cities of the area seeking Him. And they found Him there on the mountain. According to Matthew Jesus healed their sick and preached to them, teaching them the Word of God.

But then, as the day drew on, the crowds grew hungry. So Jesus feeds them. But not in any ordinary way. The disciples did not carry that much food with them, and neither could they afford to purchase it. So Jesus has the crowd of 5000 sit down on the grass. He takes the little bit of food that they have, a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, and having given thanks distributes the food to the disciples and the disciples to the crowd. And miraculously everyone is fed. The food is multiplied to such an extent that there is more left over than what they started with!

The miracle is astounding in itself, but the miraculous way that Jesus fed the people is important not just in itself, but for what it symbolized. In Jerusalem the people were to “feed and be satisfied with the consolation of her bosom” and what was that with which they were to be fed there? It was as said before the Word and grace of God. But now the people were not going to Jerusalem but out into the wilderness to Jesus. They were, whether they knew it or not, following the words of Isaiah: “Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.” And just a few verses earlier in the same chapter, Isaiah tells what they will find when they seek: ““Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat... Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you— the sure mercies of David.” Seeking the Lord they found nourishment, not just the loaves and fishes that were miraculously provided to them that day, but Christ’s Word, and Christ Himself. For as He says later in the same chapter of John: “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.”

Though in the desert, the people had actually entered for a time the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God which is found in Christ. They had, so to speak, come into the church, and had sat at Jesus feet and dined at His table. The city of God had shifted from Jerusalem to the mountain, and to everywhere that Jesus went. St. Paul mentions it today, saying of the Old Jerusalem that it is under the Law because it has rejected Christ, but that “the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.”

And in this New Jerusalem, the Holy Church, we find ourselves by means of Holy Baptism. There we seek and find Christ our Lord, having come to the waters to have our thirsty souls quenched by His grace and Spirit. And here we, like the people on the mountain with Jesus that day so long ago, come to have our disease taken away, the terrible disease of sin, and to learn from Christ through the preaching of His Gospel, and yes, to dine on the miraculous meal He provides at His table, the Sacrament of His body and blood.

But the New Jerusalem is not limited to a particular city or building. It is found wherever these things are happening, wherever people are being baptized into Christ, wherever they hear His Word rightly preached, and wherever the Sacrament is properly given. The New Jerusalem is found, therefore, not just here, but throughout this wilderness of a world, for Christ is not limited as we are, but fills all things and is present in many places at once, miraculously and divinely in His flesh too!

And thanks be to God for that! He comes into our wildernesses with His Word and grace, not just the wilderness of this world, but into the deep and desolate wilderness of our hearts. He calls us to Himself that we may both seek Him and find Him. And now through His Gospel, He will heal us and feed us. For He who is the New Jerusalem also went back at last to the Old Jerusalem to suffer and die that we might be blessed and live and be free through Him, that we might indeed “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her... that [we] may feed and be satisfied with the consolation of her bosom.” Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧