Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Lent, “Laetare Sunday” 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Aaron Conner, Lay Preacher Ephesians 5:8-14

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bakersfield CA John 9:1-41

March 26, 2017 Psalm 23

*the Lord said to Samuel, “the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”*

Will you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and accepting in your sight, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before I begin, let me introduce myself briefly to those who I may not have met yet. My name is Aaron. I attended Grace-now-St. Paul’s for 8 years until I decided to move to San Francisco in the summer of 2015. I am currently studying Anthropology at San Francisco State University while discerning toward ordination. St. Paul’s is my homecoming and it is always a joy to be welcomed back as such. And if you ask my boyfriend Jacob, you will find I still talk about all of you all the time.

Today on this Forth Sunday of Lent we mark the middle of our Lenten Journey. For several weeks now, the Old Testament readings in the Lectionary have offered us a short genealogy of our faith beginning with the Garden of Eden, to the blessing of Abraham, to the Israelites receiving manna in the desert. The New Testament readings have offered us St. Paul’s letter to the Romans as complimenting this genealogy by highlighting the redemption given to us through Jesus. The Gospel readings have surveyed a few well known highlights of Jesus’ ministry beginning with his temptation in the wilderness, to his purpose for the world to be saved through him as stated to Niccodemus, and his breaking the racial-religious barriers with the Samaritan woman at the well. Today, we experience a shift in themes. You see, in the middle of our solemn fast we can see how close the Cross of Good Friday is, but even more importantly: the empty tomb is now in sight. The Roman Catholic Church, and churches in the Anglo-Catholic tradition of Anglicanism, as well as some Lutheran traditions, recognize this Sunday as special calling it “Laetare Sunday.” Laetare” means “Rejoice” and comes from Latin introit appointed for this Sunday which takes its text from Isaiah 66. I’ll spare you my awful Latin but it reads:

*"Rejoice, O Jerusalem: and come together all you that love her: rejoice with joy, you that have been in sorrow: that you may exult and be filled from the breasts of your consolation.”*

In the middle of Lent, just as the exiled Jews needed God’s consolation, the words of Isaiah tell us to lift up our heads because our God is with us and is about to act. Instead of purple, Laetare Sunday is commemorated with the color rose or violet, purple mixed with white, and is a day where we allowed to relax our fast. Think of it like a half-time break.

If you will oblige me for a moment, I’d like to place this day in context of the liturgical calendar. In Advent, near the winter solstice, the longest and darkest night, we experience the birth of the Incarnation, the “Word made flesh”, Jesus. It’s no coincidence that 40 days later on February 2nd we commemorate his Presentation in the Temple, also known as Candlemas, also known secularly as Groundhog’s Day, where Simeon declares Jesus as “a light to the gentiles and the glory of Israel.” From this day on, those of us in this hemisphere experience a slow increase of daylight which brings us into this Season of Spring; you may be aware that the word “Lent” comes from the Old English word which refers to Spring and its lengthening days. The Liturgical Calendar revolves completely around Jesus as the “light to the gentiles.” As we approach Easter, we experience an increase in daylight leaving the literal darkness behind. This is reflected in the readings today. The tenderness of the 23rd Psalm, the revelation of the God who sees us as we are in our hearts in David’s anointing, and Jesus healing the young blind man almost beg us to “Come and see” the empty tomb now in sight. Moreover, it is perfectly fitting that we should hear the words in St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians:

*Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light…everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light.*

That is, we were once in darkness, but through the waters of Baptism and the Grace of God we are now children of light, agents of God’s family through who Jesus shines “as a light to the gentiles.” After having a few weeks to reflect on our nature in relation to our sin, we have a reason for Laetare!

Laetare prepares us for what is about to come. Next week, the week before Holy Week, the readings return to Lenten themes. This can come across as problematic because we know life is not experienced as binary oppositions. Life is messy. Further, if we take these dichotomies of darkness/ light and death/resurrection at face value then we risk adopting the kind worldview that Christianity in our country has been criticized for; mainly, the kind of worldview that sets “us” against “them.” But I think the reason these dichotomies are set up in the first place is to help us understand our role in this world. If anything, the focus on sin and repentance in Lent remind us that the darkness in our world and our call to light are not divided by a chasm, but ever entangled in our lived experience. This begs us to explore our Christian identity, as children of light, in a world where light is often rejected.

My spiritual director, an Anglican Franciscan monk who is also a Jungian Analyst, has preached often on this. Recently, he preached in being driven out to the desert by the Spirit, Jesus confronted the darkness within his own human nature. Lent offers us the opportunity to do the same: to set aside a time where we can sit with our darkness in repentance in preparation for putting our God-given light to action. Unfortunately, when we expose the darkness, particularly the darkness in today’s power structures, there is a tendency to be as perceived as radical, or as King says, “extremists.” Being perceived as “radical” and “extremists” made King uncomfortable and should make us feel uncomfortable as it labels us as the “other.” We see the unconditional radical-ness of Jesus demonstrated in John’s Gospel, where Jesus challenges the status quo by in healing the young blind man on the Sabbath. Recall that this healing occurred in response to the question of whether this young man’s blindness was due to his sin, or his parents. Jesus was seen as an extremist because he exposed the darkness of the religious/political power system, and he saw the young man not in the category that society has placed him, but as God sees him. Things haven’t changed much. Marginalized people today are still faulted personally for their social status in our society and the status quo always freaks out when we, like Jesus, try shine light onto the power system. For King, being radical is unavoidable. And as Christians we, as children of light, have to be radical for “love” and “justice” in the face of a world in darkness.

However, it is important to remember God doesn’t see us as society sees us. Our commitment to participating in God’s creation of this world may make us “radical” or “extreme” to the powers that be; but for us, when we remember that our struggle against the darkness is entangled in our daily life, we no longer live as radicals but we live in the reality that God has given us in the Resurrection. Living as children of light starts with you and me. We don’t have to go at this alone; in fact, we can’t go at this alone. We need each other, but we also need to constantly engage with the One who sends us. In Lent, we practice the basic principles of Christian spirituality in prayer and devotional reading. If you leave with anything today, may it be this: shining into the darkness cannot be done without the constant reliance on God’s word, our shared sacramental life, and prayer. If you haven’t picked up a devotional habit this Lent, it’s never too late. If life just seems so overwhelming and sometimes it seems that your relationship with God is maintained on a weekly basis, that’s OK. But remember, the call to struggle against the darkness, to embrace and raise up those who are oppressed is a day by day choice, and just as Jesus was there for the young blind man in the end, he is here with us now. God loves you and is ready to walk with you, just as he walked with King to Selma, and just as we carry our cross with Jesus to Calvary. Remember this as our cause for rejoicing in these remaining days of Lent.

*“Jesus said, I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”*

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.