

Laetare, A ✕ D 2011

John 6:1-15

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 Even in Lent, even in times of hunger, even in times of suffering, even in the midst of sickness, even in the midst of pain, even in the midst of chaos, even as death seems to encircle you, rejoice. That's the point of Laetare, a day on which to see things through the rose-colored glasses of the Resurrection. Stuck in the middle of Lent, almost as a hinge between the three weeks we've been through and the two weeks of Passiontide ahead, where the fasting is intensified, Laetare is a breath of fresh air. Flowers return, and the colors lighten from a vibrant violet to a fresher rose. Laetare exists to say, "Take a deep breath. Everything will be alright. This too shall pass. The night will soon be ending. Joy comes in the morning. Jesus is coming."

2 Joy is not the same as happiness. Joy comes from the Lord and is durable enough to weather suffering and hardship, persecution and decay. Happiness has no durability. The slightest thing will shatter happiness. Happiness, however, is what the world expects when it asks you, "How are you?" Fine, good, happy: these are acceptable responses. But anything more than two words is more than the asker wanted to know. But not in the Church. Here, frankly, we're not worried about happiness. You don't need to maintain the charade; you can check your mask at the door. Here, it's okay to suffer, to hurt, to grieve, to mourn. Here you are in the company of those who will weep with you, who will share your burden of suffering. The Body of Christ, the Church, is a people well acquainted with suffering, but a people whose joy is nevertheless unmitigated. So why joy? Why rejoice? Because today is Laetare.

3 Every heresy is born in truth. The crowds weren't seeking after something evil. They hadn't replaced the good of Jesus with something wicked. The heresy was that they were replacing a greater good with a lesser good. The problem with the crowds who want to take Jesus by force and make Him their bread king is not that Jesus hasn't just provided them with bread. He has. This meal is miraculous. He has given them something from nothing, demonstrated His power over creation, caused rumbling bellies to be still, and provided twelve huge baskets of leftovers. He is a bread king. But that is a small part of what He came for. What drew the crowds out to the shore of the Sea of Galilee without thought for provisions is the fact that they had seen or heard of the miracles Jesus was performing. Real people had been healed of real sicknesses, long-term chronic, painful, life-threatening sicknesses. And they wanted some of that. So when Jesus gave them a free lunch, they knew He was their man. But while He healed, that's again a small part of what He came to do.

4 The problem was that the crowd wanted to settle. They were content with just some healing, with some bread and fish for their bellies. So Jesus withdrew. He loved them enough not to give them what they wanted. He came to do so much more that give them more of the same, more of the bread which only postpones death, healing which only avoids death by a certain ailment. The problem was that the god they wanted was too small.

5 And yet can't you see yourself in this crowd? When the happiness falters, your thoughts begin to doubt God's love for you. When the bread runs low, when your stomach rumbles, you wonder what good a Lord who calls Himself the Bread of Life is. When pain increases, when the

suffering intensifies, when the prognosis grows worse, you start to wonder how a good God could let this happen to you. The problem is you want a mere bread king. Repent. Jesus wants to give you more than bread. God is bigger than your small desires.

6 The miracles Jesus performed are not the ends; they are the means. St. John calls them “signs.” These miracles, these signs, point to a bigger reality. He who healed bodies and cured diseases is He who came to be infected with the disease of sin. He who filled bellies with miraculous labor-free bread is He who delivered the Bread of Life, His flesh, through the sweat of His brow and the blood of His hands. This King is bigger than a bread king. He is the King of Kings who came to wear His crown of thorns and reign from the throne of His cross. He withdrew from the crowds, refusing to be there mere bread king, in order to die on the cross, to be their eternal King. He quit providing for their temporary, small needs in order to provide for their lasting, greatest need. He withdrew from the crowds in order to draw them to Himself. He refused to be their small savior from suffering, in order to be their big Savior from sin and death.

7 So, rejoice, beloved. Today is Laetare. In the midst of suffering, you can rejoice because Jesus suffered. In the midst of crosses and trials, you can have joy because Jesus endured the cross. When death lurks, when the grave looms, you can rejoice in hope, sneering at powerless death, deriding the toothless grave, knowing that your Savior died to defeat death, to shatter the grave’s power. There is joy in the midst of unhappiness because of the cross. You are set free from settling for lesser goods, because your Lord has obtained for you the greatest good: forgiveness, salvation, eternal life.

8 And with these immeasurable blessings, you get also the smaller blessings, as well. The Lord who fed the thousands with bread and fish, this morning feeds millions with the Bread of Life, His own flesh. At His Supper, Jesus gives you life, real life, eternal life. Every pain is healed, every suffering soothed, every cross removed, every trial relieved in Jesus. These problems will not last. They are less real than the life Jesus delivers in His Word and Sacraments. Your Lord is far bigger than your life’s difficulties. Rejoice. He is a big enough Savior to deal with your biggest problems: sin and death. Rejoice. That He has solved these problems is the proof that He has solved all these smaller problems, as well, even if your eyes cannot yet see the solutions. He gives daily bread, everything you need to support your body and life, too. Rejoice.

9 So sing. “In Thine arms I rest me; Foes who would molest me Cannot reach me here. Though the earth be shaking, Ev’ry heart be quaking, Jesus calms my fear. Lightnings flash And thunders crash; Yet, though sin and hell assail me, Jesus will not fail me. Satan I defy thee; Death, I now decry thee; Fear, I bid thee cease. World, thou shalt not harm me While I sing of peace...Pain or loss, Or shame or cross, Shall not from my Savior move me Since He deigns to love me...Hence, all fear and sadness! For the Lord of gladness, Jesus, enters in. Those who love the Father, Though the storms may gather, Still have peace within. Yea, whate’er I here must bear, Thou art still my purest pleasure, Jesus, priceless treasure!” Rejoice.

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Pastor Jeff Hemmer