

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Today's old testament reading give us a picture of prophecy and fulfillment. Ezekiel speaks of a people whose "iniquity" and "uncleanness" have caused the Lord to turn from them, to hide His face from them, and to set His glory among another people altogether; but he goes on, speaking for God, "I will bring again their captivity ... have mercy on them ... and gather them ... and all shall know that I am God ... *Neither will I hide my face any more from them: for I have poured out my spirit upon the house of Israel...*"

Once more we see the cycle that forms the core of the Old Testament Scriptures: The people in trouble call on God. God hears and answers. They follow Him until they tire of it. They stray and disobey. Trouble comes, They call on Him ... and so forth.

The cycle didn't start during the time of the prophets. It didn't even start with the nation of Israel. It goes back to the fall. In some books of the old testament, it almost appears with a macabre sense of comic relief. The book of Judges repeats this phrase over and over after the record of every Judge: "*And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord.*" It's a cycle, unfortunately, that we can often see in our own lives. It seems that that is just what fallen man is like: unruly, disobedient, self-serving, unable to reform and stay reformed. It's a cycle that, with only history to go by, looks pretty hopeless. Even many of the promises that keep coming from the prophets, don't give any real hope. It often looks as though it's up to the people to be good, that only their own strength and righteousness will make them able to receive the promises - - and clearly, they don't have either.

Lent is a time that, in a way memorializes this cycle. The 40 years in the wilderness were a low point in this universal human experience for the Israelites. It was a long long time for contrition, penitence, and repentance. And now, during lent, we are remembering and

participating in that. we participate in contrition, penitence, prayer, repentance, and yes, all too often, we participate in the failures and the fall, so it's not so difficult to remember the cycle as we might like.

Yes, it all looks pretty hopeless, but there are other promises. Promises that behind it all is great hope. There's a verse you might be familiar with, which explains what's going on behind the scenes... The Gospel of St. John chapter 3, verse 16:

"God so loved the world ..."

this not just an emotional feeling of good will, but such a real, visible, active love:

"... that he gave his only-begotten Son ..."

given to live and suffer, die and rise again

*"... that whosoever believeth in him,
should not perish, but have everlasting life."*

You see, the love God has for the world is behind the scenes, acting on our behalf, and lent is, not only a participation in the 40 years with the Israelites, but also in the 40 days in the desert of perfect fulfillment by the messiah. Behind it all, there is Christ, the ultimate end of the cycle. God became flesh and blood to do what we cannot do for ourselves. He stepped into our world to ransom us, and takes our hand, as he leads us on paths our strength cannot manage. Let me repeat that last part – *He leads us on paths our strength cannot manage*. You see our hope is not only the hope that we shall not perish – the hope of escape from the ultimate consequence of our sins – not only the hope of future joy, peace, and everlasting life (as if that weren't enough), but a hope for the present as well. Jesus said, *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* And, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians in our second reading that we *"are changed into the same image from glory to glory"* and elsewhere *"...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold; new things have come"*. Our hope is for the present. We are already made new, the image of God is even now being restored in us, and because of His perfect 40 days in the

wilderness, our 40 days of lent and indeed the rest of our lives can have eternal significance.

So, today is a day of drama, a day of contrast - even contradiction. It's the season of lent, and we remember our sins. We repent and prepare for the resurrection. Yet, even during Lent, today (Sunday) is a day set aside to celebrate. This morning we prayed a prayer at the beginning of service that we often pray. It's the Sunday Morning prayer and is found in the Family Prayer section of the Book of Common Prayer. As most of the prayers in here, it's packed with meaning. In the first phrase, it succinctly defines what Sunday is for us: "*O God, who makest us glad with the weekly remembrance of the glorious resurrection of thy Son our Lord...*" so, it is because of the resurrection, that today, like every Sunday is a festival, a feast day, a day to celebrate. It is an Easter in Lent! What a contradiction. Yet, we have grown accustomed to such contrasts in our worship, right? Follow with me, the drama of a typical Holy Communion Service. We hear a summary of the law and recognize how short we fall; We confess and repent; We receive forgiveness from God through our Priest; We hear the comfortable words of the Scriptures recalling to our minds the great hope that we do have; We receive an exhortation to do the work for which we are called, and finally, we get to participate in the great mystery of Passover (and of Easter) by receiving the body and the blood of our Lord, the means of grace and sign of inclusion in Him.

As an aside, let me acknowledge that today is not a communion service, so this perhaps is a bit of tease, but let us await all the more eagerly with great anticipation next Sunday and then Easter Sunday when we can again participate in the great Holy Feast. That high drama which is so familiar to us, but which is so incredible that in it we are directly included in the story and redemption of all history, even of all eternity!

In conclusion and summary, let us again pray the Sunday Morning Prayer:

O God, who makest us glad with the weekly remembrance of the glorious resurrection of thy Son our Lord; Vouchsafe us this day such blessing through our worship of thee, that the days to come may be spent in thy service; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever, Amen