



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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ASH WEDNESDAY

Restore to Me the Joy of Thy Salvation
Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17

Have you ever been homesick? It is a miserable feeling. In fact, it is possible to have fun and appear to be fine when you are miserable inside. When I was a young fellow I was excited about going off to camp for a week in the mountains. My best friend Johnny Brown and I were going as Tenderfoot Scouts along with another troop to the Blue Ridge Mountains just above Saluda, North Carolina. I don't know if it was that we were the youngest ones in a group of older Scouts whom we did not know, or that it rained most of the week, or that the Scout Leader in our cabin was a gruff old fellow named "Mutt," but we were plain homesick all week. We learned a lot about Indian lore. We hiked and swam and did all the fun things one does at Scout camp, but for some reason we were homesick. We did fun and exciting things, but we simply were not happy. We were homesick.

This coming Sunday our choir will sing that beloved spiritual that goes, "On Jordan's stormy banks I stand and cast a wishful eye, to Canaan's fair and happy land, where my possessions lie." Whether you take those words as historic and think of an Israelite exiled from his homeland or consider them to be metaphorical and about some wearied soul longing for heaven, the emotion is the same. The voice reverberates with homesickness. There is a yearning, an aching of the heart, for a place that feels like home.

Lent begins on the banks of the Jordan with Jesus, hair still dripping wet from his baptism, walking off into the wilderness. Something compels him. Scripture calls it the Holy Spirit. Something pushes him into the wilderness. I think the Spirit was pushing him to find home, not a physical place to live, but his heart's home, his place with God where he would also find true joy in living.

Some people do not really like Lent. Most of them are not here this evening. You may be one of them. You do not really like Lent because it is too austere, too somber and negative feeling for your taste. You want and need something uplifting and joyful in worship because there is enough gloom and grimness in your daily life to go around many times over. You want something that will help you forget all the overly-serious stuff in the world and enjoy life for a few moments at least once a week.

If that is the case with you, then you are in the right place. Lent is designed for you because the journey of Lent is a quest to get over the Jordan to a better, happier land. It is a journey to find a place that feels like home rather than a place

that feels foreign and unhappy. Lent is an effort to get to a place where real joy truly exists.

We begin Lent with a psalm by King David, not one of his happy, exuberant psalms that extols the goodness of the Lord and counts his many blessings, but a psalm of confession and repentance. As we all know, David, the shepherd become king, had it all—literally. That was his problem. He had everything but he wanted what was not his: Bathsheba. His relationship with Bathsheba led to the murder of her husband Uriah and the agonizing grief over the death of their son at childbirth. When confronted with his sin by the prophet Nathan, David found himself at his own Jordan River, cut off from the God who was home for him. He confessed his sin, agonized over what he had done, and begged God to restore his life. He also asked that God “restore the joy if his salvation.”

David represents our homesickness, our separation from all that would make life truly joyful and fulfilling. His prayer echos our own deep cries for forgiveness and help. His homesickness is our homesickness.

God heard his prayer as God hears all prayer. God forgave and restored David so that he is remembered most for his leadership of Israel and his poetic praise of God rather than his sin and sorrow. By God’s grace he crossed over his Jordan, made it through his wilderness of the spirit, and found his true home once again. The joy of God’s salvation was restored to him.

I have to admit that my homesickness continued for another year or so until I finally decided that I was either going to be miserable and miss out on some wonderful experiences or I was going to trust that I would return home following great adventures. I chose the latter. I discovered that I could be at home wherever I was as long as I trusted that I was not alone and would be okay.

We are all homesick to some degree for we have all wandered from our home with God. We call that sin in theological terms, but it is a sickness of the heart and soul. What we need and what we should want is to find our way back home where we will once again discover the joy of our salvation. Lent does not have to be a downer. It does not have to be cold and somber. We spend time reflecting and being honest with ourselves and God because that is serious business, but we do it so that we will be filled with joy on Easter morning when we celebrate Christ’s resurrection and the joy of our own salvation.

So admit your homesickness and join me on this journey that will lead us across Jordan to “Canaan’s fair and happy land.” Join me on this journey to a place where we will be filled with the joy of the Lord. Amen.

May our prayer be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Accomplish in us, O God, the work of your salvation that we may show forth your glory in the world. By the cross and passion of your Son, our Lord, bring us with all your saints to the joy of his resurrection.

Father in heaven, the greatness of Your love is beyond words to describe. By the power of Your Spirit, liberate us from all self centeredness, that we may be free to love others as Christ loves us.

Lord God of Hosts: Make of us pilgrims throughout these forty days. Lead us through discipline to discipleship, through fasting to feasting, through privation to freedom. Free us from our own struggles, so that we may more fully serve one another.

Loving Master and faithful friend - help us to be obedient and joyful, humble and caring, merciful and loving. Anchor us in your live giving word and make us radiant for you - fitting ambassadors of your message of reconciliation.

Father of all mercy - as we work together with Christ, help us to not to accept your grace in vain, but to remember that now is the day of salvation, and to call upon you and serve you as you desire..... we ask these things in his most glorious name. Amen

Rev. Richard J. Fairchild
February 25, 2004
adapted