

Grace That is Stronger Than All Disasters  
Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (Laetare)  
Sermon Text: Isaiah 54:7-10



*For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. <sup>8</sup>In overflowing anger for a moment I hid My face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord, your Redeemer. <sup>9</sup>“This is like the days of Noah to Me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you. <sup>10</sup>For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but My steadfast love shall not depart from you, and My covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you.*

Deep in the African jungle, a family slaughters a rooster and offer the rooster as a sacrifice to the ancestors. They do this because their oldest son is to go into the city to earn money for the family. With the sacrifice, the family hopes to appease the gods so that nothing bad happens to their son as has happened to many others when they go into the big city. Let’s look at a completely different place: amid the hustle and bustle of a busy city, a man unrolls his carpet, turns to God with a bowed head, and prays... And in India, the people line up in front of a temple – each of them wants to walk over fiery coals at this Hindu festival so that the coming year will bring blessings and not curses. In Israel, the Orthodox Jews go from house to house and encourage their fellow believers to keep the Sabbath. They believe that if all the Jews in the world properly observe the Sabbath, then the Messiah will finally come and then all suffering will come to an end. What unites all these people is that they feel separated from God or they feel threatened or they are searching for God’s protection. They sense that something is wrong with us and with our world. We sense that too. Whenever a terrible new war breaks out or when a natural catastrophe occurs, we ask ourselves the question: where does this come from? Could someone have done something to avoid such a bad fate... The poet, Friedrich von Schiller, describes the human condition like this: *“This is the curse of the evil deed – that it must always give birth to evil.”* Schiller described the world in its essence well. You can observe that an evil force is at work in our world. It is also true that an evil deed leads to ever greater evil deeds. Such a thing can be seen in one’s private life as well as in bigger world events. Anyone who has told a little white lie feels compelled to cover it up with an even bigger lie. We’ve seen this in political events too. A horrible war already sows the seeds for the next, even more gruesome war. So the knowledge of evil is nothing new. Schiller knew that, so do all the different people who make sacrifices, pray, or do other things in the hopes of saving themselves from evil influences. But do we also know something about grace? Do we know about grace which holds such power that not only can it resist evil, but it can also turn the general state of the world in the opposite direction... that is to say, for good? Can the pull of evil be reversed? Can it be that the compulsion to give birth to new evil deeds can be reversed and that the fruits of goodness can grow? Can it be that this grace also works in my body so that I can be saved from the pull of evil and follow what is good? Can it be that this grace is so strong that it remains, even when hills and mountains collapse? First of all, one must establish that it isn’t easy to talk about this grace. When things are going well for people and we talk about grace, our conversation is boring. And if we tell people who are miserable about the grace of God, our words seem cruel.

To know how to speak about grace, we must turn to the Old Testament evangelist and prophet, Isaiah. In the words we read today, he addressed the people of Israel during their captivity in Babylon. For almost half a century they suffered exile and separation from God’s sanctuary in Israel. They felt the separation from God was a real separation that destroyed an entire generation. The opinion that God had forgotten His people forever and that there would be no going back was widespread. It was in this situation that Isaiah preached about grace. And the question that arises is this: what reason could Isaiah have had to speak of God’s grace in this way? If Israel was forgotten by God for so long, what moved Him to be gracious now, suddenly? Is it that God, in His kingdom, counts the prayers of His people and when they prayed the Lord’s prayer enough or made enough sacrifices or cried out to God enough, that all the prayers would outweigh the evil so that the measure of good outweighed the bad and God could again be gracious? No, it’s not like

this. We can't do anything to bring about God's grace or to change His mind. God decides to be gracious even though people are evil. *"...but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the Lord, your Redeemer.*"

God actually confesses that He turned His back on the people of Israel for a while. And God confirms that this is why they have been in captivity for almost half a century. But it is not God's will to punish forever. God doesn't take joy in punishing His children. Instead, it pushes Him to show His grace. God loves with all His heart. He is gracious with all His heart and can't wait to pour out His grace upon us again and again. The Israelites got to hear all of this as they were still in captivity. They got to hear about God being gracious in a situation when there was still no sign of that grace. This is the same for us as Christians. Our life here and now is separated from God. We hear, feel, see, and experience much evil in our own bodies. When an earthquake happens somewhere in the world, it affects not only non-Christians but also Christians. Evil doesn't stop for Christians. Even today, many Christians die a horrible death in the many torture chambers of the world. And yet, we may trust in God's grace in this situation. What this trust is based on can be found in Isaiah because God says to us there: "I want grace!" God chose to be gracious. This is true. And God having chosen to be gracious is proof that He is gracious! That means that faith in this God who is gracious is not extremist but relies on that which is already established and known. This Sunday of Laetare is also called "little Easter" and is represented by the image of a grain of wheat. The picture is clear because the grain of wheat must be dropped into darkness and disaster. It must die. But the knowledge of the fruit that sprouts a hundred or a thousand times from the dying grain of wheat, brings joy in the midst of suffering. So it is with Paul when he wrote the letter to the Philippians from prison. His own death was imminent and yet he constantly wrote to the Philippians: "Rejoice!" These verses speak about a firm trust and knowledge that God wouldn't abandon those who are His. He doesn't abandon them in death either. From these verses, faith, which knows that nothing can separate us from the love of God, is on display.

When Isaiah preaches about God's grace to his fellow countrymen long before Christ, he wants nothing but this: to show the people God's gracious will as a reality. Even when things are going terribly for us or when faith begins to falter, he wants to paint us a clear picture of this grace. This can be best explained with an illustration that Martin Luther himself imagined. In his illustration, Luther describes two rooms. In one room, God's wrath reigns. In this room, you can see all the evil things that happen in our world and within us. Christians are in this room just like all other people. We also experience the separation from God. We also experience the need to call out to God and ask for His protection. We also experience sickness and death. And yet, for us, everything is different because we see another room next to this room of God's forsakenness. In this second room, nothing but God's love reigns. In this room, nothing but God's grace reigns. Christians see this room as something that is not only attainable in the distant future, but the door to this room is already standing open. Christ Himself is the door to this room. We don't need to first open this door with prayers, sacrifices, or other endeavors. The door to God's love is already open through Christ. And when we are baptized, we already enter into this room and experience God's unconditional love. When we also go to the Lord's Supper, we celebrate this love God has for us and experience it firsthand in our own lives. And yet we keep returning to the old room where sin rules and where Satan wants to lure us into temptation. And especially in these times when we are in the dismal room of sin, we can know that God's love persists! Jesus remains faithful to us! God has more in store for us than we know. Even if the Matterhorn and Zugspitze fall into the sea years from now, God's love will never be taken away from us. Amen.