

4th Sunday of Lent - March 10, 2024

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

How's your Lent going? If you're like many, if you're like me, any number of the resolutions that you made on Ash Wednesday—for example, to abstain from pleasures such as chocolate, sugar, sweets, alcohol, or soda—have fallen by the wayside. But that may be a good thing, for these failings remind us of our humanity and our radical need for salvation in Christ.

We're all human; we make mistakes. That's why it's gratifying to know that in many cases, we get a **second chance**:

- The Kansas City Royals got a **second chance** to win the World Series in 2015 after coming "oh, so close" in 2014.
- Our youngest son—who a number of years ago said that he never wanted to have children—recently got his second chance; he just shared his joy, with Mary and me, that he and his wife are expecting **twins** in September.
- And there are the Kansas City Chiefs, who not only got a **second chance**, but a third, fourth, and maybe even more chances to win the Super Bowl in the Andy Reid/Patrick Mahomes era.

Today is Laetare Sunday, "Laetare" translated into "rejoice" from the first word, in Latin, of the entrance antiphon for this Fourth Sunday of Lent, the traditional half-way mark of Lent. The usual austerity of the Lenten season is put on hold on this day when the Church allows flowers on the altar, as well as joyous music. Additionally, we rejoice because the joy of Easter is only three weeks away.

Next week we have additional reasons to interrupt our Lenten penances with:

- St. Patrick's Day, when we're all Irish with the annual parade and related festivities, followed by
- St. Joseph's Day, when several parishes around town host a St. Joseph's Table, a symbolic "thank you" to the foster father of Jesus for answering the people's prayers to end a devastating drought many centuries ago.

These days of festivities in the middle of the "sorrows" of Lent remind us of the frequent ups-and-downs in our own lives, while today's readings retell the ups-and-downs in the lives of people and nations.

In the first reading from Chronicles, the author—sometimes referred to as the "Chronicler"—recounts a period in the up-and-down history of the people of Israel when "all the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people added infidelity to infidelity," breaking the commandments that the Lord God had given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Despite the warnings of the prophets, the people continued to sin, until God chose to allow Jerusalem and the temple to be destroyed by foreign invaders; with the people carried off into the Babylonian exile.

In today's responsorial psalm, the people of Israel in exile express their longing for home, its beauty and its music. As a result of their conquest and captivity at the hands of the Babylonians, the people of Israel felt the humiliation of defeat and remorse, recognizing the goodness they had lost.

Only after seventy years had passed did the Lord give them a **second chance** and end their exile, but from an unlikely source. The Persian King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and was inspired by God to allow the captive people of Israel to return to their homeland and rebuild God's temple in Jerusalem.

In today's gospel, Jesus has a private meeting, at night, with Nicodemus, one of the leading Pharisees. Jesus initially confounds Nicodemus with the concept of being "born again." Nicodemus confuses bodily rebirth with the need for spiritual rebirth of which Jesus is preaching. Then, Jesus comes right out and tells Nicodemus why he, the Son of God, came to the earth, which is the very essence of the Good News of our salvation: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." (Jn 3:16) There it is: God made man, Jesus Christ the Lord, is giving all humanity a **second chance**; a **second chance** for eternal life, for salvation!

So, even as Lent continues for another three weeks, on this Laetare Sunday, on St. Patrick's Day, and on St. Joseph's Day, remember that not all is suffering and not all is rejoicing. Proper perspective and the truth teach us that there is always reason to rejoice and give thanks to God for the gift of our salvation!