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“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:15).

Fourth Sunday of Lent

[2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23](#); *Ps 137*; *Eph 2:4-10*; *John 3:14-21*

Don McClean’s evocative song, “By the Rivers of Babylon,” is based on Psalm 137 and captures the sorrow endured by Israel in exile. Their captors ask them for songs of their homeland, and as they sing, they vow never to forget Zion. “May my right hand wither and my tongue be silenced if ever I forget you.” The act of remembrance contains the hope of return. If God once saved them, despite their failures God’s fidelity will restore them once again.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTnspbSjKVc>

Midway in Lent, we pause like the Hebrews in the desert to rejoice (Laetare) because of our rescue from the slavery of sin and the promise of new life to come. Both the past and the future inform the present moment. When we glorify God we say, “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.” Whatever our traumas, fears and losses, God already holds us secure in love. Yet, as Psalm 137 reminds us, there is a shadow of grief to life that never fully lifts, for time, change and death accompany us on our sojourn toward ultimate joy. We are not spared the sorrow of being mortal, or the reality that with love comes suffering.

In today’s Gospel, Nicodemus seeks out Jesus in the dark of night to try and understand his message. The great scholar cannot grasp the promise of rebirth.

Jesus invokes the scene in the desert when the people were bitten by serpents. The remedy lies in gazing on a bronze image of the serpent Moses fashions. The cure is in the curse. The image of the “lifting up” of the serpent becomes the redemptive mystery of the “lifting up of the Son of Man,” the crucifixion and death of Jesus as the source of our rebirth to new life.

It is a total paradox to believe that the death of Jesus somehow fulfills the Law and the Prophets, and the mystery only deepens when Jesus tells Nicodemus that God’s love for the world is the only explanation for the divine plan to give his only Son to win back sinners as the children of God. Our Lenten journey is leading us to the Paschal Mystery, proclaimed at the Easter Vigil by retelling the story of our salvation from Genesis 1 to Mark 16: God so loves us that Jesus laid down his life for us, to bring us home from exile. As Paul tells the Ephesians: “God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ -- by grace you have been saved —, raised us up with him...”

We have made this mystery our goal and our hope. In exile or in freedom, in grief or in gladness, God is with us.

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