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 Sermon  
 March 22nd, Lent 4

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen.

The Word of the LORD which forms a portion for our sermon text this morning comes to us from Isaiah, chapter 49, starting at verse 8:

**This is what the Lord says. In the time of favor, I will answer you. In the day of salvation, I will help you. I will guard you, and I will appoint you to be a covenant for the people, to re-establish the land, to redistribute inheritances that are now deserted, 9 to say to the prisoners, “Go forth!” to those who are in the darkness, “Show yourselves!” They will graze beside roads, and they will find pasture on all the barren heights. 10 They will not hunger, and they will not thirst, and neither scorching wind nor sun will strike them, because the one who shows them mercy will lead them. He will guide them beside springs of water. 11 I will make all my mountains into a smooth road, and my highways will be raised up. 12 Look, people will come from far away. Look, some will come from the north and the west, and some from the land of Sinim. 13 Shout for joy, O heavens, and rejoice, O earth. Let mountains burst forth with shouts of joy, because the Lord is comforting his people, and he is showing mercy to his afflicted ones. 14 But Zion said, “The Lord has abandoned me. The Lord has forgotten me.” 15 Can a woman forget her nursing child and not show mercy to the son from her womb? Even if these women could forget, I will never forget you. 16 Look, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are never out of my sight.**

#### **THE SERVANT SHIFTS OUR STATUS**

- I. Once Prisoners, Now Re-established**
- II. Once Afflicted, Now Comforted**
- III. Once Forsaken, Now Inscribed**

This is the Word of The LORD!!! The congregation may be seated...

Mercy, Grace, and Peace ARE YOURS from your God and Father and from your Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. Dear fellow Redeemed

What is your current status? This is a question that wouldn't make very much sense only a few years ago. But today, it is a somewhat relevant question. Today, everything is online. We have these social media profiles which tell the world what we want it to know about us. We make public our relationship status, our employment status, and our likes and dislikes. All this

information is out there for anyone to see... that is if we want it to be.

Well, a much more relevant question to be asked is “what is your spiritual status”? How would you answer that question? It's a question that we might be tempted to try to avoid, yet we know we should be ready to give a defense for the truth that is in us. Everyone here would freely admit that they are a

Christian. But that's really not all that specific enough. You could say that you are a Lutheran and that would specify more but sadly isn't much better. You could say "conservative Lutheran" and that would be a bit closer. But even then, your status could remain a bit unclear. What is it exactly that you believe?

The truth of the matter is that it is really hard to describe exactly what you believe in just a few short terms. That is one of the reasons we confess the creeds during our worship services. Sometimes you need plenty of words to boil down and crystalize your faith.

But, if you did have to summarize your beliefs in short, succinct terms, what would those terms be? Part of the problem is that when you would list one term, you would also freely have to admit to the opposite. You could say without a doubt that you are a saint... yet at the same time, you would also have to admit that you are a wretched sinner. You could boldly claim that you are a child of God... yet at the same time, you would have to admit that at one point you were in fact under the rule of Satan. Like the famous spiritual declares, "I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind, but now I see."

What is with all the inconsistency? Well, we have to admit these things because we have been changed. Yes, at one point we were in darkness, but now we are in the light. What is the factor that brought about these great reforms in our lives? Well, Jesus Christ of course! Because of everything He did for us, it has forever changed your status. This is clear from our sermon text this morning. All of us have to admit that, at one point in our lives, we were all prisoners, afflicted, and forsaken. But all of that was before Jesus. Now it's all different. Now, we are re-established, we are comforted, and we are inscribed in God's book of life! These changes are all and only because of Jesus, and we pray the Holy Spirit would guide and bless our study here this morning.

At Lent, we often hear about the suffering servant. This is what is prophesied by Isaiah in his 53rd chapter. But that is just one of many different "songs"

about this Servant. Here, in Isaiah 49, we have another "Servant song". Throughout this text, we see a lot of first-person singular pronouns. Look at that first verse: **In the time of favor, I will answer you. In the day of salvation, I will help you. I will guard you, and I will appoint you** This begs the question, who is the I here, and to whom is He talking to?

The "I" here who is talking is The LORD, that is GOD. **This is what the Lord says.** He is talking to and about His servant, that is the Messiah, who we understand by faith to be Jesus Christ. When Isaiah says here, **I will help you. I will guard you, and I will appoint you to be a covenant for the people**, it is God speaking to Jesus.

Why is that significant? Well, simply for the fact that the LORD is describing all the things that He would accomplish through that Messiah, and the ones who would benefit from those things would be you and me.

What is the first benefit that we would receive from the Servant on behalf of God? **I will appoint you to be a covenant for the people, to re-establish the land, to redistribute inheritances that are now deserted, 9 to say to the prisoners, "Go forth!" to those who are in the darkness, "Show yourselves!"**

If someone went up to you and said, "I have the greatest news to tell you! You have been set free!" how would you respond to that? Wouldn't you be confused? If nothing else, you would probably be angry. "What is this person talking about? I am an American! I have always been free! What gives this person the right to imply that hasn't always been the case!"

But of course, the status the LORD through Isaiah is talking about is not a physical one, but a spiritual one. These prisoners that he is talking about here are not actual prisoners who were residents of physical jails. Rather they were spiritual prisoners, and those jails are far, far worse than any earthly prison.

Someone did, in fact, go up to a group of people to say this. That person was Jesus and the response He got was typical. **John 8:31-36 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My**

word, you are My disciples indeed. 32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” 33 They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free’?” 34 Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. 35 And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. 36 Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

Freedom is a relative term, isn’t it? We all seek freedom, that is the principle which this country was founded on. Yet, freedom doesn’t mean we are free to do whatever we want.

We too wanted freedom. That’s exactly when mankind got into trouble. We thought we would be like God when we ate of the tree in the garden, that was what Satan’s whole lie was based on. Yet while we were free to know good and evil, at the same time we became enslaved to sin! The only freedom we had in this state was freedom from righteousness, which isn’t any freedom at all! Paul writes in Romans 6: **For when you were slaves of sin, you were free from righteousness. 21 So what kind of fruit did you have then? They were things of which you are now ashamed. Yes, the final result of those things is death. 22 But now, since you were set free from sin and have become slaves to God, you have your fruit resulting in sanctification—and the final result is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the undeserved gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

If you never went to jail, you wouldn’t like being called a former prisoner. If you did go to jail, you wouldn’t like that information to be all that public. It suggests a troubled past, which in turn makes imaginations run wild. But, if you were on death row, then that proclamation of freedom isn’t shameful, rather it is whole heartily embraced!

It’s hard to be imprisoned and not to be afflicted in some way. Prison is not a fun place. You should be motivated to not end up there. The problem that those Jews who were offended at Jesus’ notion of freedom

was that they didn’t see the jail bars that were clearly in front of them. He was talking about spiritual imprisonment and spiritual enslavement! That is the same problem that the spiritually incarcerated fail to see today. They think that their spiritual freedom from God’s Word is a good thing... at least it is a fun thing. They see believing in God or an archaic book as a shameful thing. Yet, it is this faith that truly sets us free!

This restoration that we have been given by Jesus is different. That is abundantly clear from how Isaiah describes it here: **They will graze beside roads, and they will find pasture on all the barren heights. 10 They will not hunger, and they will not thirst, and neither scorching wind nor sun will strike them, because the one who shows them mercy will lead them. He will guide them beside springs of water.**

I don’t know much about what kind of fields are good for feed livestock, but it pretty safe to conclude that the “barren heights” or grass “beside the roads” wouldn’t be as good as the normal pastures on the plains. At least, that is how it would seem. But this is not the case with us! We are feed on the heavenly heights and upon the roads which we actively travel. These pastures are much more nurturing than anything we would feed on in these sinful lowlands!

If you had to describe yourself, probably two terms you wouldn’t choose to describe yourself would be “ex-con” or “cattle”. Yet that is exactly what we are! We were all in the jail of hell! That was were our sin firmly placed us. Not only that, but we were on death row! We were as mindless as livestock, following after anything and everything, not thinking for ourselves! To sum it all up, we were afflicted!

Yet, we are not ashamed of these facts, rather we embrace them! Why? Because we have been comforted by the LORD’s Servant! Isaiah here interrupts the dialogue of the LORD to put forth mankind’s natural response to this spiritual comfort... **Shout for joy, O heavens, and rejoice, O earth. Let mountains burst forth with shouts of joy, because the Lord is comforting his people, and he is showing mercy to his afflicted ones.**

Isaiah here paints a picture of people coming to be lead by the servant over a perilous terrain. These people would flock to Him in droves from every direction! They do this, and we do this because He comforts and leads all who come to Him!

Yet, it is still easy to feel forgotten. Typically, in times of trouble, it is easy for anyone to conclude, "Where is God?". We are tempted to think when we are experiencing times of trouble (like what we are experiencing currently) that either we have displeased God in some way and He is taking it out on us, or that He doesn't care about us at all. It can be easy to feel forsaken and forgotten. But that is simple, lowland types of thinking. The truth can be hard to see, but that doesn't mean it isn't true!

This note of complaint is interjected to the rejoicing that Isaiah had previously displayed. **14 But Zion said, "The Lord has abandoned me. The Lord has forgotten me."**

This is a complaint that is typical, one that we ourselves are guilty of thinking. "Where is God now that I need Him?" It is easy and natural for our sinful natures to feel abandoned, to develop a "woe is me" attitude. But it is out of weakness that we feel this self pitting feeling. We focus on the temporal sufferings alone while at the same time we fail to see the suffering Servant whom we should really be focused on!

It's kind of laughable. I am not saying that anyone's suffering is to be laughed at, but when you apply the truth of God's Word and Promises, our weakness is pretty nonsensical. We simultaneously feel like the Jews that Jesus interacted with and the Zion described here by Isaiah and. At first, we are unwilling to admit that we need any help at all, claiming that we are these blessed creatures who have been forever free. But the second any type of tribulation comes our way, we complain that God doesn't help us and has abandoned us! We want to boast about our independence and strength in the good times, but when the bad times come around we are so quick to question whether or not God is good?

Yet, even though we are as weak as this, God remains ever faithful! **Can a woman forget her nursing child and not show mercy to the son from her womb? Even if these women could forget, I will never forget you. 16 Look, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are never out of my sight.**

This is a simple yet beautiful picture that causes any doubt of abandonment to quickly vanish. A mother does not forget about her nursing child. How could she? The love between a mother and her child is perhaps the strongest natural love found in this world. She loves her child deeply and profoundly. She will not feed her child one minute and forget about the child in the next. The child might forget that it was feed and nourished, but the mother will not!

Yet, how much greater is God's love for us? Our needs are ever before Him. He will not forget about us, it's simply not possible! We as flawed children might forget about His love, but that doesn't mean it's not there! As immense as a mother's love is for her child, how much greater is the LORD's love for his people whom He bought and paid for?

How often do you look at your hands during the day? It's hard to even reckon. One of the big changes that we have been told to make to our daily routines these days is to constantly wash our hands. The CDC recommends that we should wash our hands constantly, and for a period of 20 seconds. Turns out, 20 seconds is a very long time! Because we can spread this virus easily through touch, we are much more aware of the status of our hands these days...

Well, there is a reason for the saying, "I know it as well as the back of my hand". It is because we see our hands a lot! If you had tattoos printed on your hands, whatever was written on them would be viewed constantly. That is why some people write reminders on there hands and arms. It's a bit primitive, but it does make those reminders seen!

God Himself has inscribed us onto His own hands! How will He forget about us? It's simply not possible! The Servant Himself has that reminder on His own hands. They bare the marking of what it took to make us His people once again. Before Jesus, we were

these lost and condemned creatures. We were afflicted prisoners, seemingly forsaken. But He remembered us! Jesus Christ was pierced so that we would have His saving atonement applied to us! David prophesied about this in Psalm 22: **For dogs have surrounded Me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet (Psa 22:16 NKJ)**

Because Jesus was willing to take the nails and the spear, we have been healed! By His wounds, we are made whole! God never forgets about us, and the proof of that is found at the cross of Christ. We are inscribed on the palms of His hands, and Jesus has the nail marks to prove it! Because of this fact, our names are also inscribed on something else, the book of life, and we will worship Him here and in heaven! **"He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. (Rev 3:5 NKJ)**

What is your spiritual status? It was one thing, but now it is another. It changed... all because of Jesus! Yes, at one point our status shamefully read, "Sinner, rebel, son of wrath, afflicted prisoner, utterly forsaken". This status should have stayed this way forever. But that is why we should burst forth with shouts of joy because it has been changed for us! Jesus came and died for us! Our status is now and forever, "God's holy saint, His dear child, comforted and redeemed, eternally established, inscribed in His book of life for all time!"

Yes, it can be easy to feel forgotten, but we never are! Our lives and circumstances may change, but God's love for us never does! The proof of God's unchanging and enduring love is found in Jesus' cross, and that loved changed what could not be changed, the status of our souls! Let us forever respond as Isaiah did here, and **Shout for joy, O heavens, and rejoice, O earth. Let mountains burst forth with shouts of joy, because the Lord is comforting his people, and he is showing mercy to his afflicted ones. AMEN!!!**