Sermon — 04/28/24

Text — Exodus 14:13-14

Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again.The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Theme — “Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s hymn is one of the oldest in our hymnal. In fact, it is one of the oldest in ANY hymnal, written by John of Damascus almost 1300 years ago. As his name indicates, John lived in the important Syrian city of Damascus. Damascus was the first major Christian city to fall to the Muslims, about 100 years before John’s time. His father — though himself a Christian — served as a high-ranking civil servant in the government of the Islamic ruler of the area. John, we are told, was basically another Daniel — that is, he excelled in all facets of learning (secular as well as religious) and seemed destined for a distinguished career in government. However, as a young man he threw it all away to enter a monastery. He was eventually ordained as a priest and left behind a great number of writings on theology, liturgy, and philosophy, as well as many hymns. One of John’s chief subjects was to refute the teaching of Islam and the heresies rampant in the Christian Church of his day. His books remained important writings through the Middle Ages. John’s personal context shines through in several places of this hymn.

As I said, today’s hymn is almost 1300 years old. So, imagine that — we sing the same song as countless Christians of so many generations. So many places. Including those under the dominion and rule of a hostile Islamic state. It is truly amazing. An ancient hymn, yet one that is so relevant to our world today. And it is that hymn to which we will turn now. (pause)

*Come, you faithful, raise the strain  
Of triumphant gladness!  
God has brought His Israel  
Into joy from sadness,  
Loosed from Pharaoh’s bitter yoke*

*Jacob’s sons and daughters,  
Led them with unmoistened foot*

*Through the Red Sea waters.*

What an interesting verse! The writer starts off by connecting for us the Old and the New Testaments. It is something that maybe we take for granted, but for some in the early Church, it was a difficult concept to accept. The boundary between Jew and Gentile was a hard one to overcome. But John of Damascus wants us to be clear that the Christian faith is NOT something new. Indeed, it is as old as mankind. Adam and Eve were Christians — that is, they put their trust in the Savior promised them by God after their fall in Eden. And so, the whole Old Testament leads and points and culminates in Jesus — that promised Savior. The Old Testament is OUR history too.

In this first verse, we are reminded that Israel — God’s chosen people — is NOT determined by biology or ancestry, but rather by faith. Faith in the promised Messiah. All those who trust in that promise are of the people of Israel — God’s chosen people. Not because of blood but because God has called us to faith and made us His own. So, the Old Testament account of Israel being held in bondage and slavery to Pharaoh really is about how Satan holds mankind — how WE are held — in slavery. How the devil oppresses and torments us. How he KILLS us. But Jesus comes to release us from that dread yoke. He leads us out of our slavery to sin/death/devil into the true Promised Land of heaven. Old Testament Israel was led to the promised land of Canaan by crossing the waters of the Red Sea; we are led to the paradise of the new heaven and earth by going through the waters of baptism.

Moses and Israel rejoiced greatly when they made their exodus from Egypt and Pharaoh’s slavery. How much more, then, ought WE rejoice in the deliverance we have received by our Lord Jesus Christ, who has risen from the grave to lead us into the true Promised Land! (pause)

*’Tis the spring of souls today:  
Christ has burst His prison  
And from three days’ sleep in death  
As a sun has risen;  
All the winter of our sins,  
Long and dark, is flying  
From His light, to whom is giv’n  
Laud and praise undying.*

*Now the queen of seasons, bright  
With the day of splendor,  
With the royal feast of feasts  
Comes its joy to render;  
Comes to gladden faithful hearts  
Which with true affection  
Welcome in unwearied strain  
Jesus’ resurrection!*

Here John shifts his imagery a bit. Now he discusses Easter in terms of nature and its seasons. And there is a reason for that. Mankind always has had a tendency to worship nature. Just think of the pagan gods and goddesses — how many of them were connected to nature? The Old Testament Canaanites worshipped fertility deities, who they supposed would grant them good harvests. The Egyptians worshipped gods who were thought to make the Nile give its annual flood, ensuring the necessary water to irrigate their fields. The Greeks worshipped Zeus and his thunder-bolts. Why, the pagans even tried to convert Easter into one of their celebrations — think of the Easter bunny (a symbol of fertility and reproduction) or Easter eggs (which is a sign of new life)!

So, in these verses our hymn-writer is taking back Easter from these false ideas. Yes, Easter falls in the spring-time of the year when the earth comes back from winter’s death. But Easter is NOT about a mere earthly resurrection and life. No, it is about Christ’s resurrection. A resurrection which points to our own. Jesus’ death was to kill sin and its power. And His rising on the third day shows — it PROVES — our forgiveness. And if sin is dead and buried in Christ’s tomb, then we will rise from out graves on the Last Day just as He rose from His on Easter. THAT is what — that is why — we so rejoice and celebrate this holiday and season. Not just because there will be food to eat, but because we have the sure promise of an eternal FEAST with our Lord. And all because God LOVES us with an infinite love. A love so great that He fully identifies Himself with us. Coming down from heaven to be one of us. Living in our place, to keep the Law and commandments. Dying in our place on the cross, suffering our hell. And rising on the third day to give us eternal life. (pause)

*For today among His own  
Christ appeared, bestowing  
His deep peace, which evermore  
Passes human knowing.  
Neither could the gates of death  
Nor the tomb’s dark portal  
Nor the watchers nor the seal  
Hold Him as a mortal.*

*Alleluia! Now we cry  
To our King immortal,  
Who, triumphant, burst the bars  
Of the tomb’s dark portal.  
Come, you faithful, raise the strain  
Of triumphant gladness!  
God has brought His Israel  
Into joy from sadness!*

Just as John began this hymn by connecting the Old and New Testaments, so he closes it by connecting Jesus’ resurrection with us, today. *“…TODAY, among His own, Christ appeared, bestowing His deep peace…”* That means Jesus comes to us today, giving us His peace. The peace He gave those first disciples when He showed them His hands and feet — that is, the wounds which purchased their forgiveness and life. And Jesus comes to us today, to give us that same peace and life. He IS here. Here, in His Word and sacraments. The Word — in lessons, liturgy, sermon, and teaching — that Word is the very voice of Jesus, speaking to YOU. Telling you of His love. His work of salvation. His peace which passes all understanding. All won for YOU by those wounds and scars, by His suffering and death.

And in the sacraments — in baptism, in absolution, in communion — it is JESUS who is present and active. He washes you clean in the waters of baptism. He raises you up out of those waters, a new creation. He joins Himself to you there, making you one with Him. Forever. In the absolution — the forgiveness of sins — it is Jesus who is bestowing that forgiveness upon you. HE forgives you, because HE has paid the price. You are His precious and beloved, the one for whom He did all this. And nothing, nothing, can ever overcome that love He has for you. And then He seals it all by inviting you to come to His feast. To eat and drink His Body and Blood. For you. For your forgiveness. For the strengthening of your faith. To enjoy a foretaste of that feast still to come. The feast which NEVER ends.

It is all HERE. Today. For you. Today — and every Sunday, every worship service — truly is Easter. When your risen Lord comes to you, to give YOU His love, His blessings, His salvation. And so we do as our hymn bids us do: *“Come, you faithful, raise the strain of triumphant gladness! God has brought His Israel* — that is, you and me and all believers — *into joy from sadness!”* (pause)

Yes, this hymn is indeed a very old one. But it is certainly not out-of-date or irrelevant to our time! It cannot be, because its themes are universal to all times and all place and all peoples. God loves us. So much that He has delivered us, His Israel, from our slavery to sin/death/devil. He brings us to the true and eternal Promised Land. And Easter proves it. So we raise the strain — the joyful song — along with Adam and Eve, with the Old Testament believers, with the apostles, with John of Damascus, with all the saints of all time (past, present, and future). Christ has risen. He risen, indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

The peace which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS — Offertory/Offering

FE — Offertory/Prayers