

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem.” That may sound like a rather strange encouragement for the beginning of Holy Week, a week during which we observe our Savior’s last meal with his disciples and his crucifixion on Calvary’s hill. How can we rejoice in view of what happened to our Savior? How can we shout for joy when we think of the misery, the suffering and the shame he endured because of our sins? We couldn’t if Jesus’ biography had ended with the events of Good Friday, for then we would have nothing to hope for, nothing to rejoice in and nothing to look forward to beyond this life. But we know that Jesus rose again on the third day, and that he now lives and reigns to all eternity as our glorious King. Thus our Palm Sunday joy is really a preview of the coming joy of Easter morning, a preview, dear confirmands, that you need to take to heart, because these words from Zechariah remind us in no uncertain terms that our Lord is always faithful to his promises and always faithful to his people.

Have you ever had one of those days when everything seemed to go against you from the start, a day when Murphy’s law took effect the moment you stepped out of bed so that if anything could go wrong it did go wrong throughout the entire day? Remember how you felt on those days when the bottom seems to drop out of life? If you do, then you can begin to appreciate how the Israelites felt to whom Zechariah first proclaimed these inspired words of our text.

They were literally down and out, discouraged and disillusioned by the way things were going for them. When they had the chance to return to their homeland from their exile in Babylon, they were excited, enthused and eager to go back to their beloved Jerusalem to rebuild their temple and restore their nation to a place of prominence once again. They had hoped for a quick restoration of their former glory and the fulfillment of their messianic hopes. But things turned out to be a little tougher than they had imagined. Jerusalem was little more than a pile of rocks and ruins. It took a lot of hard work to clear away the rubble just so they could rebuild their own homes much less restore the temple. Then too, the native inhabitants did not take kindly to the return of the Jews while the surrounding nations did everything in their power to make things more difficult for the Israelites, even though they were protected by an imperial edict.

When their dreams failed to materialize as rapidly as they had hoped for, the people became discouraged and depressed. The work of rebuilding the temple came to a standstill as the people lost heart in the project and hope in the Lord. Compared to the superior strength and relative independence of the heathen nations around them, they were nothing but a band of wretched beggars. Thus they may well have wondered whether the Lord would ever fulfill the glorious promises that he had given to their forefathers. It certainly didn’t look that way at the present time.

In his prophecy, then, Zechariah turns their thoughts from their present woes to the future fulfillment of God’s promise concerning the coming Christ. Their return from captivity was but the first step toward the realization of that promise. In the verses preceding our text, Zechariah foretells the overthrow of the Syrians, the Phoenicians and the Philistines—the very nations that seemed to be so superior in the eyes of those who had returned to the Promised Land. Then Zechariah looks ahead to the coming of the Messiah, Zion’s King, and the establishment and extension of his kingdom. “READ VERSE 9.” Instead of moaning about their troubles, Zechariah calls upon the people to literally “jump for joy” because their King is indeed coming to them. There is to be no doubt about it. The Lord had not forgotten his promise. The promised Son of David would indeed come into the very city they were now rebuilding. Thus they had every reason to rejoice and to return to their work of rebuilding the temple because God is always faithful to his promises. Their long-expected King would eventually come in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

We know that he did come riding into Jerusalem exactly as Zechariah had said. True, the event occurred several hundred years later, but it did take place precisely as the Lord had promised. Contrary to the oriental kings of his day who rode on steeds of splendor, Christ came into Jerusalem in lowliness and humility on a common beast of burden. He came not as a conqueror but as a gentle or “lowly one” who was willing to lay down his life in order to provide salvation for a world of sinners. He came to proclaim “peace to the nations,” peace between God and man, a peace that would be possible only because of the events of Holy Week—because of the suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord.

As we once again journey through another Holy Week, we are reminded time and again of how the Lord is faithful to his promises. How often don’t we hear the inspired writers say: “This happened that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet. . .”? Sometimes those words seem to go in one ear and out the other as if they have no real bearing on our lives today. But they do! They remind us that God always keeps his Word—that his predictions always come true and his promises are always fulfilled. And that, my dear confirmands, is something that we all need to remember.

There may well be times in your lives when you may feel much like the Israelites of Zechariah's day—down and out and discouraged by the way things appear to be going. But things aren't always what they seem to be. More often than not, how we feel depends on how we interpret the events of our lives—whether we see them as part of a malevolent force that is out to get us, or whether we realize that in all things God is working for our eternal good, the same God who has graciously brought you to faith and guaranteed your safe passage into eternity by the sacrifice of his one and only Son.

In view of God's promises, then, I would encourage you to REJOICE IN THE LORD always because God is faithful. He will not test us beyond our ability to endure, but with the trial will also make a way out so that we can stand up under it. You see our Christian joy rests not on the outward circumstances of our lives but on our living Lord who never goes back on his Word. He always keeps his promises, which is more than we can say for any of the guarantees of this life.

A few weeks ago, one of the news broadcasts interviewed a man who was noticeably upset by the failure of the bank where he had deposited his money. This particular individual was further irritated by the suggestion that he had perhaps made a bad investment. "I put it in the bank," he said, "and what could be safer than a bank?" What indeed but the promises of our God! Jesus reminds us that heaven and earth will pass away, but his word will not pass away. So let's rejoice in the Lord who is not only faithful to his promises but is also faithful to his people.

When things seem to be going wrong in our lives, we have a terrible tendency to act as if the Lord has withdrawn his favor from us and forgotten about us altogether. During the good times we are confident of God's goodness, but during the bad times, we are tempted to question and perhaps even challenge God's love for us. The Israelites were no different in this respect. They too felt as if the Lord had not only forgotten about his promise but had also forgotten about his people. Otherwise things should have been going better for them. In order to counter such thoughts, the Lord turns from the future fulfillment of his promise to the present plight of his people as he tells them: "As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit. Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you."

The Lord obviously had not forsaken nor forgotten his covenant people. Like the first-born in a family, the Israelites would receive a double measure of their inheritance because of the blood of their covenant or agreement with the Lord. In other words, they would be blessed physically and spiritually as the Lord fulfilled his promise of a Savior. Thus out of the "waterless pit" of disappointment, the Lord beckons them to return again to their true Fortress, to the Lord, their God, who is an ever present help in trouble. Under his watchful eye, their enemies would be overthrown and their nation re-established in the Promised Land so that their King could come to them just as the Lord had promised in the days prior to their captivity. Even though they may have had their doubts and were less than zealous for the cause of the Lord, the Lord's faithfulness to his people would not change.

What was true for God's people in Old Testament times is true for God's people today, and that includes you, dear confirmands, and me and everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful to his people, which is why Peter could write these words to believers of his day who were going through some very desperate times: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith, of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:3-9) That salvation is yours and mine thanks to the faithfulness of our God who kept his promise to redeem his people.

So dear confirmands, don't ever doubt God's promises or his love for you because his faithfulness endures throughout all generations. With that thought in mind, I would encourage you to REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS, AND AGAIN I SAY REJOICE. Regardless of the circumstances of your life, you have a God who will not let you down, a God who has already prepared a place for you in paradise, and a God who promises to be with you throughout all the ups and downs of your life. Amen.