

February 26, 2017 – Exodus 24:8-18 & Matthew 17:1-9

If you would, please turn to page 417 in your hymnals. You should be looking at the hymn “Alleluia, Song of Gladness.” We'll be singing this hymn in a few minutes at the close of our service. But I wanted to take a closer look at it in my sermon today. Because it's kind of an odd hymn.

I mean, the first verse is perfectly normal. *“Alleluia, song of gladness, Voice of joy that cannot die; Alleluia is the anthem Ever raised by choirs on high; In the house of God abiding Thus they sing eternally.”* It's just talking about the angels in heaven joyfully singing alleluia before the throne of God.

But then we get into the second verse and things become a little bizarre. *“Alleluia thou resoundest, True Jerusalem and free; Alleluia, joyful mother, All thy children sing with thee; But by Babylon's sad waters Mourning exiles now are we.”* And then, by the third verse, things have taken a decidedly unhappy turn in our previously joyful hymn: *“Alleluia cannot always Be our song while here below; Alleluia our transgressions Make us for a while forgo; For the solemn time is coming When our tears for sin must flow.”*

What is going on here? Why are we exiles in Babylon? And why are we saying “alleluia!” over the tears we shed because of our sinfulness? Well, as it turns out, this is no ordinary hymn. It's a very old hymn, for one. It dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. And it was actually written specifically for Transfiguration Sunday, which is today. Even though it doesn't say a single thing about the Transfiguration.

What it does talk about is Lent. And the coming of Lent on Ash Wednesday three days from now. Because, in most Lutheran churches, the Transfiguration is always celebrated on the last Sunday before Lent begins. And this hymn tells us why.

First of all, it is full of the word “alleluia.” Alleluia is actually two Hebrew words put together. *Allelu*, which means “praise” and “yah” which is short for Yahweh. The Lord. And so, put together, alleluia literally means “praise the Lord.” And we hear the word alleluia all over the Bible, in the Psalms especially, and all over our liturgy and all over our music.

Except during Lent. Because there's an ancient tradition in the church that during Lent you don't use the word “alleluia” during the worship service. You don't sing it. You don't say it. Because Lent is not a time of praise. It's a time of sadness and mourning. A time of confession and of repentance.

And so, on this last Sunday before Lent begins, we fill our songs with alleluias. Because, in a couple of days, there won't be any more alleluias. In a couple of days we will be like Jerusalem after the exile.

Knowing full well that God has not abandoned us. That we are still his children. But that, for a few weeks at least, we're in Babylon. Exiles from the joy of the Lord. Mourning because our sinfulness. A sinfulness that should, by all rights, condemn us permanently into exile. Not just the exile of Babylon or the exile of Lent but the exile of Hell.

For a few weeks, we mourn our sin and we silence our alleluias. Because alleluias cannot always be our song while here below. We want them to be. We desperately want them to be. We want coming to church to be like Moses and the elders. Like Jesus and the disciples.

Think about it. How many of you would skip a single worship service if coming to church meant stepping into a pocket of heaven? If you walked through those doors and the floor looked like it was made of sapphire and the air was filled with the glory of the Lord. And up here instead of me standing at a pulpit, God himself was sitting on his throne with a giant banquet feast. Inviting us to eat and drink from his heavenly food.

How many of you would miss a service if coming to church meant seeing Jesus himself? Glorified until his face shone and his clothes were as bright as bolts of lightning. And instead of my feeble sermons, you got to listen to Jesus and Moses and Elijah talking about meaning of life. How many of you would miss that?

The truth of the matter is that there was a time when we got all of that. When we saw God face to face. And we ate and drank with him. And the world was perfect. And God would just show up and take a walk with us in the cool of the day. And it wasn't for a few minutes or a few days. It was all the time. It was the only thing we knew.

Those moments when Moses and the elders ate with God. When the disciples saw Jesus Transfigured. They weren't supposed to be exceptional or supernatural or temporary. They were supposed to be commonplace and natural and permanent. That was what was supposed to be normal.

And we blew it. It's because of our sin that we don't eat from the tree of life that God gave us. It's because of our sin that we don't walk with God in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day. It's because of our sin that we are cast out of God's presence. It's because of our sin that moments like those described in the Bible seem almost impossible.

It's because of our sin that alleluias cannot always be our song while here below. And why our transgressions make us for a while forgo. And why we have this solemn time called Lent when our tears for sin must flow. When our tears for all that we abandoned because of our sinfulness must flow.

The hard reality is that as amazing as it would be to sit down face to face with God and eat a meal with him. As awe inspiring as it would be to see Jesus in his transfigured glory and hear him talk to Moses and Elijah. As amazing as all that would be. And as much as we would love to see it and love to be a part of it. As powerful a motivator as that would be to make us get out of bed and show up to church on Sunday morning. If God looked at us and said, "Ah, but wait... sinners aren't allowed in here." Then none of us would get in. Because there is no motivation in the world that can keep us from sinning.

You want proof? Look at our Old Testament lesson. Or rather, look at what comes immediately afterwards. The elders of Israel go up to the foot of the mountain with Moses. They see God. They eat with God. They have this amazing experience. And then God says, "Hey, I wanna talk to Moses alone for a while." And he takes Moses up to the top of the mountain. And the elders wait. And they wait. And they wait. And after forty days of waiting they throw up their hands and say, "Well, it looks like God has abandoned us. Let's go make a golden calf and worship it instead."

In forty days they go from sitting in the presence of God to worshipping an idol made by human hands. You think you can do better? I doubt it. Our tears for sin must flow. Because we are so pathetic. What does one of our prayers of confession say? "I, a poor miserable sinner." Boy, ain't that the truth.

And so we have Lent. Which is, not coincidentally, just a little over forty days. Forty days to withhold our alleluias. Forty days to be exiles in Babylon, mourning our captivity to death and the grave. Forty days to remember our transgressions and weep over our sin.

Forty days to remember what Jesus paid for. Why he suffered. Why he died. And why he rose again. As the final verse says, forty days to *"pray Thee, Grant us, blessèd Trinity, At the last to keep Thine Easter With thy faithful saints on high; There to Thee forever singing Alleluia joyfully."*

That's our goal. Not to remain exiles forever. Not to despair of our sin. Not to abandon hope of God's love. And, in the process, turn to a golden idol. But instead to return to our songs of alleluia on Easter morning. To wake up that morning and sing all the louder, "Praise the Lord!" with all the faithful saints on high.

Because even though our sin, for the moment, keeps us from meeting with God in heavenly halls of sapphire, His love still lets us taste heavenly food in the Lord's Supper. Even though our sin, for the moment, keeps us from hearing Jesus talk shop with Moses and Elijah, His love still lets us hear His Word to us whenever we need it. Even though our sin, for the moment, keeps us from seeing Jesus transfigured in all His glory, His love still lets us see the cross on which he died for us.

Alleluia cannot always be our song while here below. But it can be our song on Easter morning. It can be our song even in the shame of sin and the pain of death. It's not our song during Lent, but it is our song at the resurrection. It is the anthem raised by choirs of angels and faithful saints on high. It is the anthem of our coming King. Who frees us from captivity and takes us home with Him. Amen.