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“The Great Reversal”

Text: Isaiah 61:1-11 (with Fifth Passion Reading)

The last two or three generations have seen a great persecution of the Church. In the former Soviet Union and now in Islamist countries, there was and is an effort to stamp out the Church through oppression, affliction, and harassment. Churches are seized and desecrated, or destroyed. Christians are arrested and persecuted, or killed. The Christians that remain are driven underground and into hiding with the hope that as the years go by, they will become fewer and fewer, die out, and become extinct. There is great suffering and great fear. It is not an easy time for those who remain faithful. And perhaps it is beginning to happen in our country too, where not communism or Islamism but now radical secularism is trying to silence the voice of the Church and destroy her. The signs of religious freedoms being taken away are ominous.

But we have also seen that tyranny broken, most recently when the Soviet Union fell and Christians were allowed to be again. What joy was theirs and what praise arose as Christians came out from underground - a resurrection, if you will - and Churches were reclaimed and many heard the Gospel for the first time. What a few years before had been only a dream had become a reality.

Well that is the message of this fifth and final Servant Song of Isaiah. That the Servant of the Lord is coming to free us from a much worse captivity than all that - the captivity to sin, death, and hell. This captivity, led by Satan, that is seeking to stamp out the Church and her faith, but which will not succeed. Because God promised to keep and sustain His Church, no matter how bleak things look or get. And because, as Isaiah writes, the promised Servant will come. The One who is *anointed* with *the Spirit of the Lord* for this very purpose.

And what will happen when He does? Isaiah describes His work in a number of ways. He says the Servant will *bind up the brokenhearted*. Those whose hearts have been broken by the knowledge of sin, both in the world and in us, and the captivity it imposes over us, will be cared for. He will *proclaim liberty to the captives*. Those living under the oppression and affliction of sin will hear the good news of freedom. He will *open the prison* of death and the grave and set free *those who are bound* in them. He will *proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* - the year of the Lord's Jubilee. That was the time ordained by God when all debts are canceled, all slaves are freed, and all people and lands given rest. And He will proclaim *the day of vengeance of our God* - the day when all that oppresses, afflicts, and harasses His own, His children, will be toppled, and all who now *mourn* will be *comforted*.

So what joy the people of Isaiah's day must have had upon hearing these words of hope! What joy then is ours, *for whom these words have come true*. For us who now are living *in the time of the Lord's favor*, first because Jesus began to do these things in His life, but especially because *the day of vengeance of our God* has come, and is what we will remember next week -on that day called Good Friday. That day when the vengeance of God against the sin of the world was poured out upon the sinless Servant on the cross, who then broke and overthrew the power and tyranny of death and hell in His resurrection. That we be no longer captive, no longer oppressed, no longer harassed, but now forgiven and set free.

And to those thus set free, Isaiah continues, there will be given *a beautiful headdress instead of ashes*. And so the ashes of repentance and death we put on ourselves at the beginning of Lent will be replaced, in the Easter victory of our Saviour, by the crown of forgiveness and life. There will be *the oil of gladness instead of mourning*. The stench of our sin replaced with the sweet smelling aroma of Christ and His Spirit. And we will be given *the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit*. That is the robe of Christ's righteousness given in baptism, that the seed of faith, planted in baptism, grow up into an *oak of righteousness*, to the glory of God, the glory of His Servant, who has done such great things for us.

So just like when the smothering blanket of communism was removed, what a great reversal takes place in Christ and in His resurrection! When, Isaiah says, *ancient ruins* and *former devastations* are built up, when what was taken is restored, and instead of shame and dishonor, *a double portion* - the firstborn's inheritance, the Servant's inheritance - is given to you. That in the end, you have even more than before. That in the end, you live in the new and *everlasting covenant*, signed, sealed, and delivered by the blood of the Servant, the blood of Jesus Christ.

This has all been done for you! *It is finished*, Jesus said from the cross, and it was. Your redemption *finished*, your death *finished*, your captivity *finished*. Or as we will sing at the end of the service: *how Christ, the world's redeemer, as a victim won the day* (LSB #454 v. 1).

Good news for sure . . . but a danger lurks here as well. The danger that often results when captivity is overcome and freedom is given - the danger of laxity and presumption. The danger of letting our guard down and relaxing so much that we slip back into old habits, back into sin, back into captivity. And this is perhaps even more dangerous because it is so subtle.

And so the season of Lent is to battle against this very danger. To call us to spiritual attention and spiritual awareness. To call us to struggle on - to struggle against sin, to struggle against satan, to struggle for the truth. *And it is a struggle, isn't it?* For though Christ has won the victory for us, our flesh would rather be lazy, would rather ask

forgiveness than resist sin, would rather take the easy way through life. And down that easy road satan is still seeking to lure you . . . to lure you away from Christ, away from your freedom, and back into his clutches, back into his captivity to sin.

So Lent calls us to battle on - but here's the difference: to battle *not* in fear and uncertainty, but in hope and confidence. Knowing that, as Isaiah writes in conclusion, *the Royal Wedding is coming* - of Christ and His Bride, the Church. The Last Day, when the Bridegroom returns for His Bride and what is ours now by faith finally becomes a full and complete reality in resurrection and new life. That day when just as the One who is our *righteousness and praise sprouted forth from the ground* in resurrection, so He will cause us to come forth in resurrection as well, to live and nevermore to die. To live before Him in righteousness and purity forever.

That is the day we are looking forward to - the Day of the Servant, when all His work is complete, all are gathered safely home, and *God is all in all* (1 Corinthians 15:28).

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.