

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Dearly Beloved,

The theme of this particular Sunday of the Church year, always intimidates me,  
and I never quite feel up to the task.

How does one teach on the theme, "Heaven's Eternal Joy," or even comprehend it?

Even those prophets and apostles that saw visions of heaven seem only to use similes & metaphors.

From our standpoint, as sinners never having experienced what perfection is and feels like,  
perhaps it is easier to understand heaven's eternal joy more by what it is not.

And that is the angle that our Gospel text seems to take.

We don't hear about the joy of the 5 wise virgins safely inside celebrating at the wedding feast.

Instead, we hear about the 5 foolish virgins out in the cold night, unknown to the groom.

For 70 years, that is what the remnant of Judah in Babylonia felt like.

It looked very much like they were on the outside of the closed door...

except that God had never abandoned His people, and their time of grace wasn't expired.

He had prophesied through Jeremiah that He would cause them to return after the land had its rest.

*We read as follows in Jesus' name:*

#### **Ezra 1:1-7**

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing...Whoever is among you of all His people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—He is the God who is in Jerusalem...Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem....(ESV)

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen.* (John 17:17)

Heaven's eternal joy was not what they were experiencing in Babylonia.

Though perhaps for many, after so many years of the captivity, life seemed to have normalcy to it.

After 70 years, at least 2 generations had grown up in that foreign land.

The sons and grandsons didn't know what Judah and Jerusalem were like.

They never saw the Temple or attended the festivals or sacrifices there.

So when Cyrus proclaimed their opportunity to return and rebuild the Temple,

to some, I'm sure, it just sounded like a long way to go to a place they didn't know  
and a lot of work to rebuild what was torn down.

They had gotten so used to being separated from God's promises, they weren't even desired.

But to others, to those **whose spirit God had stirred up to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord**, they realized that they were missing something important, even essential.

They recognized their separation from the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that He would make of them a great nation and give them the land of Canaan.

They realized their separation from the place that God had promised to be with them,

to set His name among them, and to be united to them.  
They were separated from the Temple and its sacrifices by which the Lord made atonement for their sins and that foretold the redemptive work of the coming Messiah.

Death is that separation.

We often think of physical death first. Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body. But far more serious are spiritual and eternal death.

Spiritual death is the separation of the soul from our merciful God on account of sin.

Eternal death is the separation of the risen body and reunited soul from God's grace for all eternity.

That idea of separation is what came out in the Gospel text, remember.

Though at first, it looked like the 10 virgins were all united, waiting together for the same thing, when the cry came out to meet the bridegroom, the foolish left their post to purchase oil, they separated themselves from the Church and Lord, that was their spiritual death.

When the foolish came to the shut door, their separation from the groom and the wise virgins as final.

And the eternal declaration was made upon them, **"Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."**

They would never again have the opportunity to join in the festivities of the bridal party.

Being in Babylonia was like being out in the cold, dark night, separated from the joys of life.

The Babylonian Captivity was the result of their sins, the sins of the nation that forsook the Lord, as we have been hearing over the last few months.

Though there were times of reprieve with faithful kings, the nation quickly reverted under evil kings.

Can you imagine what the saints were struggling with in Babylon?

Wondering if God had fully abandoned and forsook them.

Wondering if they would ever have the opportunity to return to the Promised Land.

But they didn't have to wonder, the Lord had spoken through His prophets,

like Jeremiah, that they would return and make sacrifices again,

and Micah, who promised that a certain Bethlehem birth was yet to take place among God's people.

Today, some have taken the difficulties in their lives to mean that God is separating Himself from them.

That He is giving them the cold shoulder already now, just as He will for eternity.

It is a natural thought to our sinful flesh, which is always looking for a way to earn its own reward.

We think: if life is going well, then God is surely with me and is blessing me for doing well.

If we are struggling in life, then God is not with me and is punishing me for something I've done.

With thoughts like this, the Christian can quickly begin to doubt his or her salvation.

This is especially true as the corruption of this world becomes more evident in these latter days.

As we feel more and more alone and separated, from one another, even from the Church.

And it becomes a temptation to try to find a way to make atonement for the sins that haunt us, we want to make up for it, so that God will once again show His face to us.

Or we begin to despair of any hope, wondering if it is too late, if God has forsaken us already,

and we are tempted to give up, and separate ourselves from the Church and the Divine Services.

But just as the Lord sent prophets, like Jeremiah and Micah,

to comfort His people in their guilt by pointing them to the saving work of the coming Messiah,

**to give them a future and a hope** <sup>Jeremiah29:11</sup> that the Lord will return them to the Promised Land, and that they would rebuild the Temple and once again offer peace and thank offerings, so He sends His ministers to you today to comfort you and give you a future and a hope.

The struggles and trials that you face are not the Lord abandoning you, which is one of the blessings we have in not having to rely on our feelings to know God is with us, but instead **live ... by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.**

Jesus promised His apostles and you that such things will come.

They are a result of the corruption of your flesh and of this world and are the attacks of the devil. They are reminders for you that this earthly life is not the life of heaven's eternal joys He's promised.

And so they are opportunities for you to mortify your flesh, to drown your sin and evil lusts, to purge from you the desires of your sinful heart that do not accord with God's perfect will.

They are also regular and constant reminders that you are NOT alone, that God has united Himself to you in your Baptism, promising **surely I am with you always.**

That is so important to remember and cherish because just as separation is death, life is unity.

Physical life is the unity of the soul with the body.

What a wonder it is that the Son of God united Himself with you by taking such a life upon Himself, all for the express purpose so that HE could die, so that HE could be separated from God's grace instead of you.

Spiritual life is the unity of the soul with God.

This life and unity were purchased for you through Jesus' death, not just His physical death, the shedding of His holy blood, but also the separation from His father's grace as He hung on the cross, as the Bearer of your sins. Jesus suffered this death, this separation, so that you would never have to die eternally, or live in separation from God on account of your sins and guilt.

Such is God's love for you, that He has given you spiritual life by uniting Himself to you forever.

The importance of this unity with the divine is something that even pagan King Cyrus understood.

Notice that he blessed them saying, **Whoever is among you of all His people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem... and rebuild the house of the Lord...**

The spiritual unity that you need, that you seek, is found in the house of the Lord, not a house that stands or lies in ruins in Jerusalem, but where the Lord speaks to you, His child, as He does in the words of absolution, forgiving your sins and telling you that they don't separate you from Him any longer.

That instead, He has separated your guilt, your doubts, your fears and other shameful sin and vice from you as far as the east is from the west.

The spiritual unity that you need, that you seek, is found in the house of the Lord,

where He nourishes your living soul with the Bread of Immortality, strengthening the union between your body and His body as He comes to touch you and live in you, so that on the Last Day He'll raise your body from the dead & reunite it to your soul for all eternity.

The spiritual unity that you need, that you seek, is found in the house of the Lord  
where He blesses you with His presence as His minister declares, *the Lord be with you*,  
and then as you depart imparts to you the Lord's presence as He blesses and keeps you on your way,  
lifting up His countenance upon you, being gracious to you, and giving you peace  
to patiently endure your daily trials, knowing that He is with you.

And the fullness of the eternal life that you seek, perfect peace and joy & unity with God will be yours,  
there to sing unhindered the eternal ***Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Sabbaoth.***

Or perhaps to put it in terms that we can better understand,

**He will wipe away every tear from your eyes, and death shall be no more,  
neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore,  
for the former things have passed away."**

Thanks be to God.

*Soli Deo Gloria*