

LIFE IN CHRIST: LIFE IN JOY

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Isaiah 65:17-25

On Monday afternoon of this week, I was in my car when I heard on the radio the devastating news that Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was on fire. I immediately pulled off the road into a parking lot and opened CNN on my phone. I viewed the heartbreaking videos of the iconic church crowned in smoke with flames shooting out of the roof.

Several years ago, my wife and daughter and I traveled to Paris. After unpacking at our hotel, we headed out into the city and set straight for Notre Dame. It was at the top of our list of places we wanted to see. And we weren't alone. The place was packed with visitors from all over the world. It is estimated that twelve million people visit the church each year.

On Monday night when I went to bed the flames were still burning in Notre Dame and the French government had issued a warning that we could expect the worst—that the building may be lost. The next morning, however, the flames were extinguished, and, miraculously, the building was still standing. Much of the artwork and artifacts had been safely removed.

The construction of Notre Dame started in the year 1160 and took about 100 years to complete. It is built in what is known as the French Gothic style. And the church itself is consecrated to the Virgin Mary—Our Lady.

Notre Dame is landmark of the Paris skyline. Until the construction of the Eiffel Tower in 1889, the twin north towers of Notre Dame were the tallest structures in the city. It has been a house of prayer for 800 years; it was the site of the coronation of Napoleon; it is a focal point for great literature; it is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The French president has promised that Notre Dame will be rebuilt. Almost immediately millions of euros were pledged for the effort. The question now is what will the restored church look like? How will it be rebuilt? I can see three options. The first possibility is that the church will be rebuilt exactly as it was before the fire using the same materials and construction techniques. The second possibility is that they will restore the building as close to what it was like as they can utilizing modern materials and techniques. The goal would be to retain the original appearance of the church. The third possibility is that they will restore the damaged sections by blending the old architecture with contemporary design and materials. The rebuilding would incorporate modern characteristics that reflect the present age. For example, the old spire which collapsed in the fire, was not part of the original building. It was added in the 13th century and replaced in the 18th. Will

they build a new spire? Will it match the one lost in the fire? Or will they go with something modern? We will just have to wait and see.

There is no telling how long it will take to rebuild Notre Dame—five, ten, twenty years, maybe more. At the end, what we will have will be something new. And on that day the people of France and the world will respond with great joy and celebration.

This promise to restore something that is damaged and broken is the same promise that we find in our reading today from the ancient prophecy of Isaiah. In this passage, God promises to restore his people. Isaiah is writing to the Jewish Exiles—those people carried into captivity by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC. For those people, all seemed lost. They had been taken from their homes and their land, their city—Jerusalem—had been largely destroyed, the protecting walls of the city torn down, the great temple where they worshiped had been looted and burned. What hope was there in their lives? They were certain that their God had abandoned them.

No, says the prophet Isaiah. God has not abandoned you. God is always with you—even in captivity in Babylon, God is watching over you. Furthermore, as we read today, God makes a promise not just to restore the lives of his people, but to create something new. *For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.* This new creation will be a place of such blessing that the pain they have experienced will be forgotten. The old memories will disappear. The city of Jerusalem—sacked by the Babylonian army—will be restored. Once again, they shall worship in their temple. No more will weeping be heard in that city.

Then Isaiah paints an image of this promised hope. This is one of the most inspiring images in scriptures. In this new creation, Isaiah explains, everyone will live to a ripe old age; no one, not even children, will die early. Those who build their homes and plant their land will enjoy the fruits of their labor. No one has to worry about building a home and then having someone come and take it from them. All work will have meaning. And God will listen to those who call him. Then, in the scene we know as the peaceable kingdom, we read, *The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust!* Isaiah is not just describing a rebuilt Jerusalem, he is describing the kingdom of God. God's new creation is God's kingdom.

For the past six weeks, during this season of Lent and Easter, I have been preaching this series of sermons that I have called *Life in Christ*. Each week, I have invited you to look with me at the passages that are associated with Lent and Easter and explore how they instruct us to live in Christ. In the first week of the series, back at the start of Lent, we looked at the moment that God made a covenant with Abraham in which God pledged to give Abraham as many descendants as there are stars in the sky as well as a land for them to call their

own. God would watch over these people and protect them and in return Abraham and his people would obey and follow God. That is the root covenant which God has ratified through the generations. It is this covenant that is the basis of God's restoring Jerusalem and its people. It is the basis of God sending us Jesus to be our savior. It is the basis of the Easter resurrection that we celebrate today.

The reason we gather here in worship today is more than just an empty tomb. Raising Jesus from death is noteworthy, but Easter is so much more than that. Others, such as Lazarus, had been resurrected before. But the events leading to Easter are the culmination of thousands of years of covenant.

A covenant is like a contract except is an agreement between two parties of unequal power. The covenant is how the two parties can work together. Realistically, the stronger party can do whatever they wish, but this covenant levels the playing field. It is an expression of God's desire to be in relation with us, to be with us. From the moment that God made that covenant with Abraham, Easter has been the inevitable outcome.

Of the two parties in the covenant, God is not the one to ever break the covenant. God will always be faithful and hold up his end. We, the people, are the ones who will and who have broken the covenant. Time after time, people have sinned and turned away from God. When the covenant is broken, a price must be paid. But we can't pay the price. We don't have the means. Only God can pay.

Imagine this. Imagine that I go to a bar one night and drink way too much. I get in my car and start driving. I have a wreck. I crash into another car. I'm arrested and thrown in jail (as I should be). I have no money for bail. I'm stuck. But then, the driver of the car I hit, pays my bail for me.

That is what God has done—paid our bail. God pays our bail with the only currency that has value—life, his life. God humbles himself and comes to us as one of us and becomes a sacrifice. The debt is paid. The covenant is honored. It was in this way that on the cross that Christ takes our sins on himself. Only the death of God would suffice.

On that first Easter, after Jesus had been executed on the cross and his body placed in the tomb, the women go to the tomb to prepare the body for its proper burial. But the body is not there. What the women find are two men dressed in dazzling clothes who say to them, *"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you... that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again"* (Lk 24:5-7).

To live as Christians in this world means to live in joy—the joy of knowing that our God loves us so much that he is willing to give his life as a sacrifice for our

unfaithfulness. We are sinful, we are broken, we are lost, and there is nothing we can do about it. Only God can make us whole. And God wants to make us whole. The joy of Easter is that God in Christ gave himself for us. He was not defeated in death. He was able to rise above death, out of hell, into life. Our God will not be defeated. Sacrificed, yes, but not defeated. Our God loves us.

The French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once wrote, “A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.” We are such a pile of rocks, but God looks at us and envisions something greater, something worthy of salvation, something worthy of God’s love. This Easter day is a day of joy, a day to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, a day to celebrate the perfect love God has for each of us. Amen.