

Sermon for November 12, 2023 – 24th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 52:1-6 EHV

Theme: **Our great Cinderella story:**

- 1) Enslaved by Satan, hopelessly oppressed,
- 2) The LORD came to our rescue, in His righteousness we're dressed.

¹ Wake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O Zion. Put on your beautiful garments, Jerusalem, you holy city, for never again will the uncircumcised and the unclean enter you. ² Shake off the dust. Get up and take your seat, Jerusalem. Loosen the chains from your neck, you captive daughter of Zion. ³ Yes, this is what the LORD says. You were sold for nothing, and you will be redeemed without money. ⁴ Yes, this is what the LORD God says. In the beginning, my people went down to Egypt to stay there for a while. Later Assyria oppressed them without cause. ⁵ Now what do I have here? declares the LORD. Indeed, my people have been taken away for nothing. Their rulers howl with mockery, declares the LORD. My name is continually despised all day. ⁶ Therefore my people will know my name. So on that day they will know that I am the one—the one who is saying, “Here I am!”

She was trapped in a world of slavery under her stepfather's harsh treatment. Her sisters tormented her night and day. Covered in dirt and ashes - cleaning a house that would never be clean - she lived a hopeless life of servitude, imagining she would die an old maid.

One day, when her family was out, a man stopped by her house with a message: “The prince wants you at his ball when he will announce the bride he has chosen.” But she was dirt poor, a person of no consequence. She didn't possess any royal attire. How could she ever go to the ball? The prince instructed the man to provide all she needed: a beauty treatment, a royal entourage, and the most stunning dress anyone had ever seen. It was time to come out of her house of slavery. It was time for her to meet the prince who had secretly observed her from afar, fell in love with her, and was ready to take her home as his wife.

The tale I just told you is Rossini's operatic version of Cinderella – a remarkable, heartwarming story that is famous the world over. Yes, every country I have visited seems to have their own version of Cinderella. Some have fairy Godmothers, others (like Rossini's) don't.

Today, we will consider a Cinderella story like Rossini's. The difference is that this tale is not a mere story. It is our story. With the prophet Isaiah as our guide, let us consider the fantastic, saving love our eternal King has for us, under the theme: **Our great Cinderella story:** 1) Enslaved by Satan, hopelessly oppressed, 2) The LORD came to our rescue; in His righteousness we're dressed!

Part One: Enslaved by Satan, hopelessly oppressed...

Our text is a prophecy meant to comfort a remnant of Jewish believers who felt as if God had abandoned them. Why would they have felt that? Because the LORD was about to judge the nation

for continually rejecting him. Babylon would conquer Judah, exile its people, and relentlessly mock them in their land of captivity. They would live like Cinderella – a slave with no hope of rising from her ashes.

But, just like Rossini’s Cinderella story, their heavenly King would have his eye on them. He knew that they would be tempted to give up hope. For this reason, he commanded Isaiah to foretell their deliverance.

But if our sermon text deals with the deliverance of God’s people from Babylon, why is it important for us to study? Because God intended this prophecy to picture an even greater salvation: how He would rescue his believers from their exile in this wicked world.

Our text begins: ¹ *Wake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O Zion. Put on your beautiful garments, Jerusalem, you holy city, for never again will the uncircumcised and the unclean enter you.* ² *Shake off the dust. Get up and take your seat, Jerusalem. Loosen the chains from your neck, you captive daughter of Zion.*

Zion was the name of the mountain upon which God’s temple was built and, together with Jerusalem, symbolizes true believers in the LORD. God calls believers to wake up. From what? Their despondency over Jerusalem’s destruction. Babylon was about to lay waste to God’s holy city because Judah continually rejected God’s call for them to repent of their idolatry and return to him in faith. Like Cinderella (a name that means “charred wood girl”), they would lie in the dust of destruction. Nevertheless, the LORD bids his faithful remnant of followers to wake up from their despair and look to him in hope. Why? Because he will deliver them.

³ *Yes, this is what the LORD says. You were sold for nothing, and you will be redeemed without money.*

Because of Israel’s continual impenitence, God kicked them to the curb like unwanted furniture – free for the taking. He did this to teach his people how their idolatry had broken their relationship with him. But even though he did this, he still loved them. His giving them over to Babylon was meant to wake them up from their spiritual apathy so that he might repurchase them for himself. That is precisely what he promised to do.

⁴ *Yes, this is what the LORD God says. In the beginning, my people went down to Egypt to stay there for a while. Later Assyria oppressed them without cause.* ⁵ *Now what do I have here? declares the LORD. Indeed, my people have been taken away for nothing. Their rulers howl with mockery, declares the LORD. My name is continually despised all day.* ⁶ *Therefore my people will know my name. So on that day they will know that I am the one— the one who is saying, “Here I am!”*

The LORD would not be blind to what his faithful remnant would suffer in Babylon. He remembered how Egypt oppressed his people before the Exodus and how the Assyrians harassed righteous King Hezekiah. The LORD would, therefore, hear every mocking word from the lips of the Babylonians against His faithful remnant and, on the day of his choosing, powerfully deliver his people. History is in His hands.

As I said before, this text pictures much more than the literal deliverance of Judah from Babylon. It illustrates the salvation of all believers from this sinful earth. We are all like Cinderella, stuck in Satan's house of slavery. He is not our real father but pretends to be so, commanding us to do his will and oppressing us with feelings of shame. He has given authority to our two evil stepsisters to tempt us into sin and mock us when we fall: namely the wicked world and our sinful flesh. However, unlike Rossini's Cinderella, we deserve to be where we are because, like the rest of humanity, our sins have separated us from God. We deserve to be cast away from God forever.

But the Prince, God's only begotten Son, has his eye on us. For some reason that human reason cannot comprehend, Jesus willingly paid the price for our redemption. What price did he pay? Well, it wasn't money, as our text says: *You were sold for nothing, and you will be redeemed without money.* No, Jesus used something far more costly: his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.ⁱ Yes, Jesus has redeemed us – bought us back from the everlasting slavery to Satan we deserve. He did this so we can live forever with him as his beloved bride in paradise.

But if Jesus has redeemed us, why do we suffer evil in this wicked world? Why hasn't he come to take us home? Because that time has not yet come. And so, just as the LORD asked his remnant of believers in Babylon to be patient until the time he chose for the ending of their exile had come to pass, so he bids us to be patient as well – even going so far as to explain why he is delaying his return. The apostle Peter writes: *The Lord is not slow to do what he promised, as some consider slowness. Instead, he is patient for your sakes, not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance.*ⁱⁱ

Part Two: The LORD came to our rescue; in His righteousness we're dressed.

So, what shall we do as we await his return: sit in the ashes of despondency and despair? No! Just as the LORD wanted his exiled believers in Babylon to look forward to their deliverance with joy, so he calls out to us:

¹ *Wake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O Zion. Put on your beautiful garments, Jerusalem, you holy city, for never again will the uncircumcised and the unclean enter you.* ² *Shake off the dust. Get up and take your seat, Jerusalem. Loosen the chains from your neck, you captive daughter of Zion.*

What is our strength with which the Lord wants us to clothe ourselves? It is the truth that we are his beloved bride, for whom he fought the devil, died on the cross, and rose again from the grave. He paid for our sins in full. We are free from Satan's power. Jesus' own righteousness, which we receive by faith, is the beautiful garments He invites us to put on. Through repentance and trust in the Gospel, we shake off all the dirt of sin and arise from the ashes of condemnation. The chains that enslave us to Satan are broken, and we can take our place at God's right hand – sitting on the throne of honour that he has provided for us as his bride.

Because of God's great mercy for us in Christ, this is who we are now by faith and who we will be revealed to be when Jesus comes in glory on the Last Day.ⁱⁱⁱ And the LORD bids us to be continually dressed and ready for that day because it will happen when we least expect it.

Therefore, just as a messenger was sent in Rossini's Cinderella to get her clothed and ready for the grand ball, so also God sends his messengers to us today, using His Word and Sacraments to encourage and prepare us for Christ's return when he will take us to heaven as his dearly loved bride.

He is coming soon, so prepare yourself today lest you be found unready for his return. How? Wash yourself in the beautifying bath he has provided for you in Holy Baptism. Even though that event happened in your past, you can remember it daily – recalling the new birth God gave you through it when He washed away your sins, clothed you with his forgiveness, sealed you with His Spirit and declared you to be his child and heir. Then, having recalled the great blessing God has given you at your baptism, you can prepare for Christ's return by throwing away the devil's slave clothes by repenting of all sin and donning the holy garments of Christ's righteousness by trusting that Jesus has forgiven your sins in full! You are no longer Satan's slave. You are a daughter of heaven: Christ's bride, whom he loves dearly and is coming to rescue.

I know, right now, you feel oppressed by the world. It mocks you for your faith and blasphemes God. On top of this, your flesh torments you with sinful desires to lure you away from Christ. And when, in a moment of weakness, you fall – the devil is there to overwhelm you with feelings of shame – trying to get you to despair of Christ.

Whenever you feel this way, heed God's call to wake up. Wash the dirt of your sins off through repentance, remembering that you are already clean because of Jesus' perfect life and redeeming death. Clothe yourself with Christ's righteousness through faith. Arm yourself with the knowledge of God's love and presence. Slide off the chains that bound you to Satan, understanding that Jesus unlocked them all.

Then, protected by his angels and guided by his faithful ministers, live your life in hope, trusting that God will keep his promise to love you more than the prince loved Cinderella in Rossini's opera. He will keep his promise to deliver you home to heaven and grant you a far better "happily ever after" than ever imagined on earth. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. 1 Peter 1:18-19

ⁱⁱ 2 Peter 3:9

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Revelation 21:2