

IV Lent 2026

Sermon - Saint Joseph Parish

Father Craig Looney

Galatians 4.21-31 St. John 6.1-14



We're now at about the half-way point in the Season of Lent. It's time to lighten things up a bit. Flowers once again decorate the High Altar. Rose-colored vestments replace the more somber violet vestments we associate with Advent and Lent...the great Penitential Seasons of the Church Year. Today we take a deep breath and get a refreshing break from our rigorous Lenten disciplines.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent is known by several names: "Rose Sunday" from the rose-colored vestments and flowers at the High Altar; "Mothering Sunday" from Paul describing Jerusalem as our mother in the Epistle; and "Refreshment Sunday" from the Gospel. The lesser-known name "*Laetare Sunday*" comes from the Introit read at the beginning of the Mass..."*Laetare Jerusalem*" ("*Rejoice, O Jerusalem*")... from Isaiah 66.10.

Our Lenten Discussion Group over the last two years has focused on the covenants God has made with his people. A covenant is not the same as a contract. If the terms of a contract are broken by one party, the other party doesn't have to keep his part of the contract. A covenant doesn't work that way. If one party breaks the terms of a covenant, the other party must still keep his part of the covenant.

We do not have a contract with God. We have a covenant with him. We often break the covenant. God never breaks his covenant with us. God does not change His nature, love, or purpose. While we may fail at times to live according to God's plan, His unconditional covenants stand regardless of our human shortcomings.

This morning's Epistle from Galatians is about God keeping his covenant with us through Jesus. The Jewish converts in the Galatian Church were insisting non-Jewish converts must first observe Jewish dietary and other restrictions in order to become members of the Church. Paul counters the false teaching we are put right with God by turning the Law (Ten Commandments) into an impossible set of rules no one can keep. Paul then tells the story of Abraham and Sarah and their servant girl Hagar, from Chapter 18 in the Book of Genesis.

In the story, we read how God made a covenant (promise) with Abraham and Sarah they would have a child of their own even in their old age. Sarah thought that was the funniest thing she had ever heard. She suggested Abraham sleep with their servant girl, Hagar, and build a family that way...a common practice at the time. But God kept the covenant (promise) he made with Abraham and Sarah. They did indeed have a son of their own, Isaac.

Paul's letter is full of allegory and imagery. Hagar and the present city of Jerusalem represent the Covenant God made with Moses. When we consider the Ten Commandments are still binding on us, we must also conclude we can't keep them without help. We're left in what Paul calls a persistent state of sin. Sarah and the heavenly Jerusalem represent the New Covenant God has made with us through Jesus...the New Covenant that finally sets us free from sin to be his children...to love Him and others as we should. Where do we learn about God's New Covenant with us...we learn about it in Church.

For Jews, Jerusalem was their "mother", because that's where they learned from the Scriptures (OT) how God always took care of them. We all know our human mothers love us and are supposed to take care of us. For Christians, our true mother is the heavenly Jerusalem, where we will live forever with God the Father and Jesus. We call the Church here on earth our "Mother", because she nurtures us and takes care of us and helps us get ready for our life in heaven.

Jesus also took care of people. He knows what we need even before we ask. In the Gospel, he made certain the people who had come to hear him preach and teach didn't go home hungry. He took five loaves of bread and two fish and fed a large crowd. He "refreshed" them and sent them home. He told his disciples to pick up the leftovers so nothing was wasted. God doesn't want any of his blessings to go to waste.

Today we rejoice in the Good News we hear in the readings that give us hope. We thank God for his gift of our Mother the Church. We get refreshed in receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. Next Sunday we begin Passiontide, and God's Covenant with us through Jesus and his unconditional act of Love and Redemption will be acted out through the Church's liturgies that lead us to Good Friday. But today...we take a deep breath and lighten up!

