**Sermon Lent 2C**

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**Cypress Lutheran Parish**

**Scripture lesson:** *Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old (Psalm 74:1-3)*

“O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?” “Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary!” (Ps 74:1, 3) These words of the royal court composer Asaph (which form the basis for our Introit for today) may have seemed out of step with his own times. Asaph, a member of the tribe of Levi, was appointed by none other than King David “as ministers before the ark of the Lord, to invoke, to thank, and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel.” (1 Chr 16:4-5)

The reign of David, the era in which the Ark of the Covenant and worship of the true God was established on Mount Zion, was a time of power and prosperity for Israel. Neither David nor his successor, Solomon, lived to see the Temple in ruins, as it is described in the Seventy-Fourth Psalm: “Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place… They were like those who swing axes in a forest full of trees. All its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers. They set your sanctuary on fire; they profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground.” (Ps 74:4-7) In the days of Asaph, such a disaster must have seemed unimaginable.

Yet the Second Book of Chronicles refers back to Asaph as a “seer” – that is, a prophet (2 Chron 29:30). Perhaps while Asaph ministered before the Ark, or on some other occasion, God granted him a vision which foretold eventual desolation and destruction. These prospects, we know from hindsight, came upon the city of Jerusalem and Judea in 586 BC under the punishing hand of the Babylonian Empire. Israel was in for a bad time – and it would be their own fault. For seventy years there was no place to worship God: no meeting-places, no tents, no Ark or altar to pray before. Nothing that had been fashioned with human hands remained to be seen, much less revered.

By all appearances, the Church of God had vanished, been vanquished, dare we say cancelled. But we know that cannot happen. Outside of that hell-on-earth which the Babylonian Captivity was by God designed to be, the Augsburg Confession is crystal clear on the point: “one holy Christian church will be and remain forever.” That is at all times and in all places the Gospel is preached. The Church remains although it will at times appear as small, or disconnected, or ineffectual, or even beset with heresies and false shepherds whom Christian author John Harris rightly calls out as “syncretists of the highest order.” As Paul writes, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed… persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor 4:7-9).

So the true Church will be and remain forever. How are we recognize it? It is not in the outward trappings we’ve come to associate with “church”: stained glass windows, red carpets, even “saintly” individuals whose personal lives are not fraught with frustrations and hidden (or not so hidden) vices. It is nice to have nice things. But Bl. Dr. Martin Luther all but grabs us by the shoulders and says: “thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd. So children pray,’I believe in the one holy Christian church.’ Its holiness does not consist of surplices, tonsures, albs, or other ceremonies…” (SA III XII 2) The Church exists where Christ our crucified – and risen – Lord is found. He had no beauty to behold; he was despised, rejected; and yet He gave His life as a ransom for many.