

4th Sunday of Lent, Cycle B  
2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23  
Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6  
Ephesians 2:4-10  
John 3:14-21  
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Our first reading today describes what occurred on perhaps the most famous and painful date in the history of Israel: 587 B.C., when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Chaldeans, and everyone who survived was carried captive to Babylon. These survivors were haunted by the question of how such a terrible fate could befall the chosen people of the living God. Our reading from the second Book of Chronicles gives their answer to the question: The people had ignored the warnings of so many prophets, for so long, that God had finally allowed them to suffer the consequences of their behavior.

But far from abandoning the people, God would be with them even in exile, and after seventy years Jerusalem, and the Temple would be restored. Why seventy years? They had an answer for this as well. It had to do with the ancient laws regarding the sabbatical year. The laws, contained in the Book of Leviticus, stated that all land belonged, ultimately, to God. It could be farmed for six consecutive years, but on the seventh year, it had to be left untouched. Planting, pruning, and harvesting for storage were forbidden during the sabbatical year. It was permitted, however, to take for immediate use whatever grew on the land of its own accord. Unfortunately, the rules didn't make it clear whether the Sabbath year was to be observed by everyone at the same time, or whether it should be calculated from the year the land had come into an

individual's possession. Despite the prophets' warnings, many people took advantage of this ambiguity, by failing to observe the sabbatical year at all. The prophet Jeremiah announced that seventy years of Babylonian captivity would, in effect, pay God back for all the sabbatical years that had been missed out through the centuries. Because the land had not been left uncultivated for one year in seven, it must now be left untended for seventy consecutive years. Then Israel would be restored.

This was something people could understand. It reflected their experience of the way the world worked -- the way it still works. If you neglect to file a tax return for five years, the year is going to come in which you will have to file five returns. If you can't find the money for a mortgage payment this month, you'll have to make two payments next month, or face the consequences. If at the office your "IN" tray is overflowing, you can't just throw everything away and start over fresh. You have to wade through the backlog until everything is up to date. That's the way the *world* works. But fortunately, it's *not* the way that God works in Christ. When we finally clear the last piece of paper from our desk, or make the final mortgage payment, we have earned a moment of self-congratulation. But again, it's not that way with Jesus. St. Paul hammers the point home: "It is *by God's favor* that you are saved. This is not your doing, it is God's gift; neither is it a reward for anything you have accomplished, so let no one pride himself on it." In Jesus, God makes us tax exempt, burns our mortgage, and dumps our "IN" tray into the recycling bin. We are offered a fresh start, from the very moment that we turn away from our stubborn selfishness, and say yes to God's offer of salvation in Christ. And if, for the time being, we continue to live in a world that often seems to demand every last ounce of its pound of

flesh, we can at least lessen its rigor by the love we show for one another. What suffering *remains* to us, is our share in the Cross of Christ, on which the Son of Man was lifted up, so that all who believe in him may have eternal life in him. The means of *his* victory is the means of our own.