*Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory of His name; worship the Lord in holy splendor. The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare, and in His temple all say: “Glory!” The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. May the Lord give strength to His people! May the Lord bless His people with peace!* Psalm 29

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.* *A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All flesh is grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers; the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers; the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.* Isaiah 40:1-8

*In a Peanuts strip Lucy once grumbled to poor Charlie Brown about the awful New Year she was having. She complained that problems abounded, and she felt that difficulties were around every corner. Then she said, “I don’t think this is a New Year at all—I think we’ve been stuck with a USED year!!!”*

American Restoration

1. My title for this morning comes from a popular TV show. Rick Dale, the host, alongside with his staff and a teenage son, restored various vintage items, bringing them back to their original condition. The variation of restored objects was indeed remarkable and being almost miraculously transformed, all of them revealed the original beauty, functionality, and the esthetical values. The works of the team of the *“Rick’s Restoration”* shop are not only incredible, but almost improbable. I could not help but to see the similarity between the restoration this group of people provided and the need for restoration the people of the Kingdom of Judah in Isaiah’s days required. The people of Judah urgently needed to be restored because as the nation and as God’s people they were not only dysfunctional but morally and spiritually broken. Isaiah, send by God as His prophet, knew about this and confronted the nation, presenting God’s case against them. He warned them that the punishment although very harsh, is but God’s response to their offensive and deadly behavior. Isaiah understood that his prophecies were unpopular with the people, but he also knew that he is the messenger of God and that he must deliver God’s message to them.

2. The people of the Kingdoms of Judah as well as of Israel in many ways resemble the old, dilapidated items that needed restoration and as the ones brought to the *“American Restoration”* team. Their restoration needed to be not just a *“bandage”* solution though, but a full blown restoration, and every restoration always begins with the complete dismantling of the object to be restored. The people of the Kingdom of Judah needed to face the exile, the removal from their homes and from their land, to be properly prepped for the long process of restoration. Facing the *“exile”* in a foreign land and the dismantling of the autonomy of the kingdom, were not enough, however. To return to the original beauty as the nation and as the people of God, they needed to return to God and to embrace Him fully, with all the stipulations as required by the Mosaic Law, and it was not up for discussion. Fully embracing God was imperative. Through his prophecy, Isaiah shows the people what the restoration requires and what it is all about, as well as what it will bring.

3. If God wants Isaiah to comfort the people suffering from the punishment of the Exile, even before the actual event takes place, it is because He wants them to understand the importance of forgiveness. So, in the prophetic vision Isaiah shows the people that although they are unfaithful to God and will be severely punished for this, the punishment will not be the end but instead will prepare them for the future and the new glory. Just as the dismantling of all the pieces of the restored item must be done and all the pieces must be cleaned, catalogued, and repainted, so the people must also face a similar process. It is not a secret that our US Marines while in the *“boot camp”* are being mentally *“dismantled”* and then *“reconstructed”* in the form of a *“fighting unit,”* in terms of what it means to be a US Marine. This is a necessary process, even if some of us, as parents, question the wisdom of doing so. Yet, these service men and women must work together as a team, in order to become the *“elite force”* of our Armed Forces and this is possible only if they all know what and how they are doing. The people of Judah needed to be *“reconstructed”* spiritually and morally and turned again into the people of God.

4. God, as the *“Master Restorer”* has already drown plans of restoration and when the people repented, when they realized that they need to be restored, He begun the restoration itself. The repentance however is not a negotiable part of the process, it is imperative and not to be taken lightly. The cost of sin is and always will be death. The experiences of the *“exile”* were not pleasant for the Hebrews, and neither was the two thousand years of *“diaspora.”* Trying to uproot the families, to separate them and transplant them is never easy, I know this first hand because I had to experience this myself with emigration 43 years ago. But this was to be experienced by the people of Judah. They wanted to free themselves from their obligations to God and they needed to learn that this sort of freedom in the long run will bring *“chains and shackles of oppression”* to them. Our modern society wants to free itself from the obligations to God and wants to continue living without Him. The question is: *“Is it worth it?”* Our modern society reaps the results of rejection of God, and we see this in the chaos, the unrests, the coercion, and hatred we witness daily, even in small communities as ours. Isaiah speaks also to us, telling us that as a nation we need to be restored and to become God fearing people guided by His, not of our, human wisdom.

 5. Any restoration project requires planning, and often the process of preparation is the most consuming one. Certain elements may need to be replaced because the old ones are too fragile and unstable. It is unfortunate, but it is necessary. When I worked on renovating my house, which was a form of restoration, before painting I needed to wash the walls, to fill the cracks and holes, to reinforce some parts of the structure, and to tape up the parts not to be painted. It was a monumental task, but it was necessary to complete the project. In our lives we too must make changes, readjust what must be readjusted and replace or restore what must be replaced or restored. Our life must be adjusted according to God’s plan and in everything, in all we do, in all of our work, play, or worship we must always focus on Him. When we truly repent we will truly embrace our convictions of serving God, not the human whims, wants and desires. The people of Judah needed not to have any doubts about this and so does our modern society and even the modern Church.

6. Isaiah’s message carried not only the words of hope and comfort, but also a message of who we are. *“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”* Unless we realize how fragile and temporary as humanity we are, we will focus only on our own greatness, and we will try to build our own kingdoms. Only when we realize how fragile our nature is, we may see God in a proper perspective. Apparently, the first man in the space, the soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin after going into space commented that he *“did not see any god there.”* I do not know if this is true or not, but I also know that astronaut James B. Irwin walked on the moon during the Apollo 15 mission in July 1971 and said: *“I felt the power of God as I’d never felt it before.”* Two people with two different attitudes and two different views of the same, incredible phenomenon. One by a man that could see only in the front of his nose and the other able to see beyond the horizon. As humans we are weak and anxious. We trust no one and we do not even often trust ourselves. This must be changed if we are to be truly human. Like any old object that might be restored to its original beauty, we too, even when we fall, might be restored by our *“Master Restorer,”* to the original splendor of creation.

7. Such was the Isaiah’s message to the people of Jerusalem. This is also his message to us, the people of the twenty first century. The message is loud and clear, and a few centuries later, carrying on that message Apostle Paul will write: *“We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.”* (Romans 8:28) The message of comfort, the message of hope, the message of assurance, is the message God still offers to His creation. This is the message delivered to all the people, to those who are like Nicodemus but also like Mary, to those who are like Lazarus or Zaccheus. This is the message to those who need encouragement and enthusiasm. This is the message to the people of Israel, and this is the message to us, the Church of Jesus Christ, His beloved *“Bride.”* This is God’s message to you and to me. So: “Praise the Lord!”