

Lent 4, 2019

Overcoming the Influence of Sin

Ezekiel 39:21-29

By Fr. Bill Baker

St. Andrew's Church – Jacksonville, OR

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our homily for Sunday will be concerned with God's dealings with the Israelites found in Ezekiel's prophetic words (chapter 39:21-29). As God speaks to the Jewish nation in Ezekiel's day we find that there is a message lying between the lines that strengthens our faith and underscores our resilience to bare the burdens of this life. God is stretching forth His mighty hand to pull you from the mire...will you take it? Come this Sunday, release your sins and grasp the very hand of God!

“And I shall display my glory to the nations, and all nations will see my sentence when I inflict it and my hand when I strike them. The House of Israel will know that I am Yahweh their God, from that day forward for ever” (New Jerusalem Bible).

The book of Ezekiel can be a very difficult book to follow and at the same time very pertinent for Lenten contemplation. Written in the sixth century B.C. Ezekiel tells a bleak story of Israel's reluctance and outright disregard for God's commands. By God's mercy, Ezekiel is commissioned to go to the children of Israel and speak against her transgressions. Israel has been a defiant household and God is about to make His strength known once again. He will do this for all to see and even the heathen will know that God's chastisement is in favor of the Israelites. God is in control...whether we are chaff or wheat.

God freed the Israelites from their captivity in Egypt and it still took forty years to clean the dissenters from their midst. After all that they had seen it is hard to believe they would continue to turn away. But we can't be too boastful. Lent is the time of year we must experience, for we too turn from God's leading and wander down the darker paths that attract us so easily. When we focus on our relationship with God we seem to only have enough energy to focus on the path for a short time and then we let ourselves be dazzled by the glitter of sin and off we go.

A Christian that goes amuck is in the sights of the heathen and it is here where God can do a work in us that will catch the attention of the world

around us. *“Thus saith the Lord God: This is Jerusalem; I have set it in the midst of the nations and countries that are round about her. And she hath changed my judgments into wickedness...Therefore thus saith the Lord God: Behold, I, even I, am against thee and will execute judgments in the midst of thee in the sight of the nations”* (Ezekiel 5:5...8). Its as though the Israelites know that their God is the One true God while at the same time find it okay to disregard the way He requires them to walk in. (For you C.S. Lewis fans this is very reminiscent of Lewis’s observance that although we all know how we ought act we often choose to do otherwise). Discipline is the remedy for making disciples. Unfortunately the remedy is required often. The world that clashes with the children of God today suffers the Christian to stand and be heard! Abortion, starvation, sexual deviations, pollution, cooperate greed...dishonest conversation...all this and much more stand between God Almighty and ourselves.

Our witness is as vital today as it was in Ezekiel’s day, *“The nations too will know that the house of Israel were exiled for their guilt; because they were unfaithful to me, I hid my face from them and put them into the clutches of their enemies, so that they all fell by the sword. I treated them as their loathsome acts of infidelity deserved and hid my face from them”* (New Jerusalem Bible). It is so true even now! In order to stay with the ‘in crowd’ we have allowed worldly perceptions to personify the church. If we don’t stand for truth, if we don’t stand for morality, if we are unwilling to share real love...can we blame God for the punishments we suffer?

Despite God’s correction we remain unmoved. We continue to turn our backs on God and follow our own deceptive natures. Even those who are able to fight a better fight than most still harbor the same nature under the influence of sin. *“Every inclination of our hearts is evil all the time”* Moses records in the Pentateuch. Giving us over to our perverse human nature gave way to our understanding that we cannot get to God on our own.

If our failures prove anything, they prove that no matter what we know, we remain incapable of choosing the right path in every circumstance. No matter how closely we are able to walk beside Jesus there will be times in our lives when we will wander off and who knows what

troubles may be lying in wait making us ineffective for the Gospel. Your Lenten journey is your time to focus on the truth, to admit you wander off the path at times and that your desire is to be continually in the presence of the light only Jesus can bring. The journey of the Israelites reflects our journeys. The journey of the Israelites tells us that God will never give up on us. The Journey of the Israelites reminds us that God will not meet us half way...he comes the whole way.

“So, the Lord Yahweh says this, “Now I shall bring Jacob’s captives back and take pity on the whole House of Israel and show myself jealous for my holy name” (New Jerusalem Bible).

Life is about finding our way back to our Father and that is worth the effort over and over again. But it is not us who find the way back but those who respond to the call and accept Jesus Christ into their hearts. *“I am the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh to the Father but by me” (John 14:6). “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and sup with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). “And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23).*

Yes, it is Christ who meets us where we are. It is Jesus Christ who extends his hand of salvation and pours His spirit so freely into our burdened souls. *“Neither will I hide my face any more from them: for I have poured out my spirit upon the house of Israel, saith the Lord God.”* All of history is a story of redemption and restoration leading ultimately to resurrection. God poured out His spirit on a nation in preparation for a salvation that would come to all mankind. The prophet Ezekiel exposed the Shekinah glory of God and His unwavering faithfulness to His promise to redeem and save all those who take hold of His outstretched hand.

Throughout Ezekiel’s prophecy we are continually confronted with the glory of God found in a future redeemer of the world. In chapter 34 we see a vivid example of our Savoir; *“Therefore will I save my flock, and they shall no more be a prey; and I will judge between cattle and cattle. And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them...and I the Lord will be their God.”*

The God of the Old Testament and the God of the Jew is the God of the Christian and Jesus is the promise who came for all. Do not forget to whom you belong and do not be afraid to let the world know it. *“With broken heart and contrite sigh, a trembling sinner, Lord, I cry. Thy pardoning grace is rich and free; O God be merciful to me.”*

Stand firm in the body of Jesus Christ, acknowledge and release your sins; look for the glory of Christ within...and you will find the hand of God reaching down.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.