

Sermon Lent 3 2019

March 24, 2019

Ezek 33:7-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Old Testament Lesson from Ezekiel.

In the Gospel Lesson this morning we hear our Lord Jesus describing two tragic incidents. One was apparently the result of a misuse of authority as He talks about Pilate slaughtering Galileans during their sacrifices and the other is the collapse of a tower which killed 18 people. Now, from what I understand we don't know a lot of details about either of these incidents apart from what we have here, but in our day we can relate, can't we? All we have to do is to turn on the news and we hear of all manner of occurrences like this.

And what does Jesus say about them? Well he asks a provoking question. He asks if the people that suffered in these circumstances were any worse sinners than those who didn't suffer. Presumably there were aspects to these events that would lead others to think that perhaps they were. Perhaps they had done something in particular to deserve this. From what I read, perhaps the Galileans were somewhat rebellious and seditious. And perhaps the tower was being built for a Roman Aqueduct so that those aiding in that building were aiding an enemy of the Jews. In recent weeks we could equate this to the shooting at the mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. As Christians who believe that Islam is a false religion, it can be tempting to see this as a byproduct of a particular sinfulness, can't it? Even if we were not of that mindset, as we look at events like 9/11 or other terrorist acts, it could be easy to be self-righteous about it, can't it? But why does Jesus direct the attention of His hearers to these events? What point is He trying to make? Do you see it? It's the call to repent, **"No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."** And if you don't get it the first time, He repeats it for emphasis, **'No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.'**

As we look to the Old Testament Lesson in its discussion of the Prophet Ezekiel, what we hear is that is exactly what the Lord is speaking through Him as well. Ezekiel is to go to the people of Israel and he is to let them know of their sin. He is to pass along the Lord's word to them as His mouthpiece and call them to repentance. **"So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn**

from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.”

Hopefully, as we hear that we can all appreciate the burden that falls on this man to accomplish this—all the more as we hear hints in this passage of how the people respond. Look at those words again, look at what the Lord tells Ezekiel the people say, **“Yet your people say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just,’ when it is their own way that is not just.”** Now that word for just there, we could understand in view of how we do in English, or as it comes to us from Latin, in terms of fairness, or like a just scale, a scale that is balanced. We could also understand this in view of a measuring rod, something normative—like how we use a measuring tape when measuring to cut a piece of wood. We use the tape to determine the right length. These Israelites heard the word of God and said, “Those commands are not the proper measure of what’s right. They aren’t the way to know what is good and what is bad.”

Now on the one hand, we hear that and we bristle. What arrogance it takes to say that God doesn’t know what He’s talking about, right! On the other hand we should recognize this for what it is. It’s the ever present manifestation of our sin and rebellion against God.

I mentioned last week—even sort of made it the theme of the sermon—that we always, always, always underestimate the effects of the fall into sin, well this is more of the same. If we’re shocked by hearing that people think God’s measuring stick isn’t right, then we underestimate the effects of the fall into sin. When we ourselves think that God’s measuring stick isn’t right, then we underestimate the effects of the fall into sin. You see this just proves the absolute sinfulness and depravity of man, and it’s proven most of all by the lack of desire for the people to want to repent. God’s Word comes to them and they don’t want to hear it.

It’s in that circumstance that Ezekiel is sent. He’s sent to preach the commands of God. In other words, he’s sent to preach the Law. As I say that, this lesson can so easily come down to that Old Lutheran distinction of Law and Gospel, can’t it? Here Ezekiel is sent to preach that Law, to preach the commands of God to the people. So that we might see the relevance, what does this connect to today? Who is sent as that watchman to speak the Word to the people?

While it’s not exactly the same, we should say that’s the pastor’s job in a very public way, shouldn’t we? And I don’t just mean publicly in terms of getting up in the pulpit, but publicly on behalf of the Church. Paul says it to Timothy. He says, **“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”** To break down that verse that we so often look at

because it points to God as the source for the Scriptures, that the Scriptures are the God given, God spoken, inspired, inerrant words of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we have to see what it's useful for. The Scripture is useful for teaching, for reproof—or rebuke as it's sometimes translated, correction, and for training in righteousness. To what end? That the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Now, as we look at this, we have to understand this is Pastor Paul writing to Pastor Timothy, so when he says, “man of God,” what's he mean? Well, in the Old Testament “men of God” included men such as Moses, David, or prophets. These weren't just Israelites, they were men called into service for God's kingdom in a particular way. In other words, while I am not a prophet, or an apostle in the way we see in the Old Testament, it's my job to speak this word. It's my job to call people to repentance. And it's hard. I don't like doing it. I'd rather not have to tell people about how they're wrong, but I have to. Please understand that if it ever comes to the point where I would have to confront you on a particular sin. It's not something I do out of self-righteousness, but out of duty to help you.

As I mentioned, though, I do this publicly on behalf of the church. This means that it's not just the pastors' job to speak this call but the Church as a whole. And as I say this, again to connect it to our culture, how often our culture doesn't want to hear this.

I read an article last week written by a brother pastor of mine, a pastor by the name of Hans Fiene. Pastor Fiene actually serves down in Chanahon at a River of Life Lutheran Church, and his words were so wise. He was talking about how the Church in our day is misunderstood, or maybe we could say its role is misunderstood. Pastor Fiene described how in our day, we have become so permissive about sin in our culture as a whole that people have begun to bristle so sharply when God's commands are spoken. In particular, he spoke about the permissiveness we have with regard to sexual sin, but it's not only that, but all of the commandments.

The point he makes is that with our permissiveness culturally, it's become easier for sins to be more accepted, and widespread. When they're widespread there's more temptation, and they're easier to commit. At a point we can't imagine any other life, and so God's commands appear unreasonable. Then in explaining the misconception of the Church he says that now the Church is seen as a mother. He says, *“we then expect Mama Church to rebuke Papa God for his unreasonable devotion to his unchanging word, telling him, ‘I know you've always said these things were wrong, but everybody does them now. So cut the kid some slack.’ Likewise, when God's children have run away from their overly rigid father into the land of unbelief, we also expect Mama Church to invite them back, saying, “Don't worry. I talked to your father. He's not going to ask you to give up something that's so important to you.”*

I think that's a fair assessment. Likewise, I think it's something even we can fall into. When we're confronted by that sin, by God's Law we can feel like it's so unattainable that it must be unreasonable and untrue. Have you ever felt like that? I think you've probably all heard the story of me sitting next to a girl that I had a crush on in high school, when the reading came up that anyone who looked at a woman with lust in his heart already committed adultery with her. At which point she leaned over to me and said, "Is that true?" And my response was, "Couldn't be!" Couldn't be just, right? Couldn't be just to demand no lust. Couldn't be just to demand perfect devotion to our Heavenly Father. Couldn't be just to demand we not say "Oh my God," when we hear it constantly on TV. It couldn't be just to demand that we not be greedy, gluttonous, or perfectly forgiving.

Christian, examine yourself and see. Christian, unless you repent, you likewise will perish. And hopefully you'll see what this law is doing. It's not binding you. It's not keeping you from having all the fun you could want. It's not Papa God being unreasonable. It's the call of the watchman telling you that your loving Father in heaven wants you to know, wants the world to know, that you are bound, we are all bound in this sin and we can't get out of it on our own.

Likewise He wants you to know that He has sent His Son to set you free from that bondage, terrible and oppressive bondage that it is. He wants you to know that Jesus has crucified sin on the cross, bleeding and dying that it has been paid for, rising again that it is forgiven. And Christian, He has baptized you to show you that this freedom is yours, that it is your sin washed in those waters and buried in His tomb, it is your freedom proven in the resurrection. He wants you to know that He feeds you with the very sacrifice of that cross at this rail, giving you that body and blood that you would taste for yourself the beauty of that freedom. He preaches that Law to you through lowly watchmen like me, that Law to the world through the weak and corrupted Church not to be unreasonable, but that our joy and our hope would be in Him and Him alone.

To close I'd like to read a bit more from Pastor Fiene, because he says it so well: *Christ has invited every sinner in this world to receive forgiveness, life, and salvation from his church. When sinners can't possibly imagine that freedom in Christ is better than slavery to Eros, you can't help them by being nicer than God. You can only help them by asking them to look at their chains long enough to know what it means when Jesus melts them with his mercy.* This is a message for me, for you, and for the world in repentance: the mercy of Jesus which comes in that turning from sin to His eternal grace which melts away the chain of our sin in His mercy. Amen.