

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
27 September 2020

Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32

Today, we have a very interesting passage from Ezekiel, so let me set the stage. In the year 598 before the birth of Christ, the general of the Babylonian forces, Nebuchadnezzar, exiled thousands of the best-trained artisans, metal workers, masons, and carpenters to aid in the building of his empire. Some experts claim this number was about 3,000 people Israelites, while some others claim this group was as high as 10,000 people. The rest of the nation of Israel was left undisturbed as a vassal kingdom. If they paid their taxes and did not rebel against Babylon, the nation could self-govern. We know that approximately 12 years later, when Nebuchadnezzar was now the Babylonian King, the nation rebelled and the rest of its inhabitants were also exiled, and the temple destroyed. But the episode that is narrated in Chapter 18 belongs to the first exile, that of the educated artisans and teachers, when Ezekiel himself was exiled.

The book of Ezekiel tells us that he was a priest, who had a ministry of prophesy before his exile, and who continued his ministry in Babylon until his death. On the day of his thirtieth birthday, while he is in exile with the elders of Judah, God appears to Ezekiel and shows him a vision of four terrifying beasts, and rising above the beasts, a person, which resembled a human being engulfed by fire. This was the presence of the Lord, who gives Ezekiel a scroll, with the command to eat it. The voice then said, "And he said to me, "Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says,' whether they listen or fail to listen," (Chapter 3:10-11.)

Ezekiel's job was to announce to the exiles that God would punish the disobedience and sinful behaviors of the Israelites who were still back at home, by causing a terrible siege against them. "He then said to me: 'Son of man, I am about to cut off the food supply in Jerusalem. The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair, for food and water will be scarce. They will be appalled at the sight of each other and will waste away because of their sin,' (4:16-17.) Then, after several prophecies related to the judgement of Israel, which become a reality within 12 years of their announcement, Ezekiel turns his sharp eye to the exiles themselves. This brings us to the current text.

So, what is the problem? The exiles in Babylon had adopted an "It wasn't me, it was the Devil" proverb to justify their exile into Babylon. The proverb goes like this, "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are on edge." This proverb has biblical roots in Exodus 34:7, which reads "God visits the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." We know it was a well known proverb because even Jeremiah quotes it in Chapter 31. The exiles blame the intergenerational sin of their ancestors for what has happened to them. This blaming of their ancestors for the loss of their land and their forced exile creates a few conditions for them: (a) It absolves them of their own sin. This is like saying, "It wasn't me!" or "The Devil did it!" (b) It creates a certain passivity and resignation that keeps them bound to their sin. They

say, “Nothing could have prevented what happened. We were bound to be punished eventually. If we had anything to do with this exile, it was not our fault. We were borne cursed by the sins of the ancestors. We could not have done anything differently.” This is like saying, “I had no choice!” or “The Devil made me do it. Therefore, I am not at fault.”

Ezekiel corrects this proverb by quoting God himself, “As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.” As we were reminded last week in Jonah, our God is a God of life and not a God of death. It is his great wish that all of us lead lives of freedom and blessing. He is as concerned for the fathers as for their children. He is as concerned for Nineveh as he was for Israel. We can not absolve ourselves of our sin by blaming all our behaviors on bad parenting, genetics, or the past behavior of our ancestors. Yes, it is true that what one generation does can gravely affect generations to come after them. We all have heard stories of wealthy men who lose all their wealth at poker, causing great poverty for their children and grandchildren. Yes, this is true that we often suffer for mistakes made before us and are often blessed by decisions made before us as well. But none of that history reduces our responsibility for our behaviors. We are not helpless victims doomed to a life of sin because of bad parenting or bad genetics. We have a say in the matter.

As if to prove this, Ezekiel gives us verses 5-24, which are an illustration he uses in his sermon or teaching. In these verses we see a story of a righteous man who is a devoted husband and father, a leader of his people, a compassionate and charitable person to the poor, and a devout Jew. Now, this great and righteous man has a son who is violent, aggressive, immoral, and unrighteous. He kills, steals, and cheats with great abandon. Then Ezekiel asks, will this man be justified, found innocent, because of the righteousness of his father? He answers his own question by saying, “Of course, he will be judged. ‘His blood will be on his own head’ (18:13.) Now, assume this evil man had a son who is as righteous and good as his grandfather, will he be judged and punished for his father’s evil? Of course, not! God is a God of life and a just God.

In a way, Ezekiel is telling his people that what happened to them, even though they see it as punishment from God for their ancestors sin, is in a very real way their own fault. They have contributed to their current situation. They are responsible for their lives and cannot hide behind the cloak of generational guilt for sin. This applies to us as well. We can make our own choices. We are not held accountable for the sin of our parents and grandparents. God’s ways are fair and just. Ezekiel wants the nation to examine their hearts and realize their own sin. He is convinced that once they do this, they will no longer be able to blame their ancestors.

The question now is, what do you do with that guilt over your own sin? How do you deal with the oppressive consequences of your actions, so that you may live in freedom? Ezekiel gives us the answer, which is the same answer given to us by Jonah last week. Ezekiel says, “Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die.”

I want us to concentrate on the action verbs in this paragraph. The wicked are invited to “Turn away from their wickedness.” This is an action. It requires a turning around, a heading in the right direction. Just acknowledging our sin is not sufficient. You must be doing something about it. Imagine that you set out on a trip to Miami, but rather than taking Interstate 10 East, you take 10 West. At some point after you pass Austin, you realize you are heading in the wrong direction. If you continue heading west, you will never be able to reach Florida and then head south to Miami. You then stop, regroup, assess where you went wrong, realize you are heading in the wrong direction, then jump back on the highway and continue heading west. Several miles from El Paso, you realize you are terribly lost. You stop again, assess where you went wrong, ask God’s forgiveness, make a decision to head in the right direction, and jump back on the highway still heading west. You get my point, assessing your sin and asking for forgiveness will never work as long as you don’t make a u-turn and head in the right direction. Knowing you are heading in the wrong direction will do nothing to get you to Miami. In order to get there, you need to turn around.

In the same way God forgave and spared Nineveh after they repented, turned around, and asked for forgiveness, the same will happen to the exiles. If they repent, assume responsibility for their actions, and turn to God, God will forgive them and their lives will change from passive resignation to their fate, to lives filled with freedom and purpose. If they move from their victim stance and assume responsibility for their lives, God will give them the freedom and life they desperately need.

My friends, I believe this passage applies very well to us. Many of us keep on doing what we have always done, hoping that eventually we will get a different result. So many of us are very quick at blaming how our lives have turned out on our genetic predispositions, the way we were parented, or the zip code in which we were born. Today Ezekiel reminds us of the words of Jesus of Nazareth. He came to earth to save sinners. He died to save sinners. He rose back to life to bring sinners back to life. If we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous.

Yes, sometimes terrible things happen to us. Yes, we are often deeply affected by the sin of others, especially parents and caregivers. Yes, many of us have difficult genetic predispositions that create real challenges for us. But when we see ourselves as nothing but victims, when we blame everything that happens to us on bad genes or parenting deficits, when we believe we are bound to make the same mistakes we have always made because of where we were born, then we become stuck in the moment. We become prisoners of our own anger and fears. We become forever infantilized and unable to assume responsibility for our lives. We become slaves of our own dysfunction and brokenness.

Remember that we were created for freedom. We must fight against the temptation of blaming others for our issues. We must accept responsibility for our actions, knowing that all we need to do is repent and return to the Lord and he will always welcome us with open arms. May he continue to bless you. Amen!