

Lent 3

March 7, 2010

Sermon Text: Ezekiel 33:7-20

Sermon Title: "Turn and Live"

Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Our text for this the Third Lord's Day in Lent is taken from the Old Testament, where Ezekiel records:

"Say to them, 'As I live,' declares the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?'"

This is our text. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer, Amen.

"It's just not fair!" How many parents have heard those words come out of the mouths of their children? Our two daughters Grace and Hope have already begun the practice of fighting over the same game or toy. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Of course when I, with the wisdom of Solomon, step in as their daddy; I am forced to choose either one child or the other to get the toy (or sometimes I just take it away from both of them altogether). Grace will usually cry "It's MY toy! That's not fair!" Maybe your teenage son or daughter wants to go somewhere with their friends or do something that you as a parent consider to be reckless or even dangerous, that famous line will come popping out of your mouth before you even know it. You know the line, I'm talking about, don't you? The one that starts with "If all your friends wanted to jump off the Empire State Building (or some other building or national landmark), I suppose you would, too?" Even when we as parents stick to our guns and do things for the sake our children, they will more than likely say more than once in their lifetimes: "It's not fair!"

And in our Old Testament lesson for this morning, the people of Israel are crying "It's not fair!" to God as well. Did you catch where they said it? In the last few verses, the Lord speaks through His prophet Ezekiel, saying:

"Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by them. Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways."

You see? Even in Ezekiel's day, the Israelites and the people of the kingdom of Judah were crying out "It's just not fair!" to the Lord their God. Of course, they might have thought that they had something to complain about. By the time Ezekiel had come around, Judah and Jerusalem had fallen. Back in chapter ten, Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of the Lord leaving the temple and the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. Many of the Israelites would be taken into exile, while a scant few—a faithful remnant—would not return to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and temple until seventy years later.

And maybe we cry out "It's just not fair!" to God as well. As we read in the first verses of the Gospel lesson for this morning, we might be tempted to ask the same questions when a natural disaster strikes our homes like the hurricanes that struck in New Orleans or the earthquakes that struck in Haiti or Chile over the past weeks. We might think that God is punishing us when we suffer a national tragedy like we did eight and a half years ago in New York, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania. Or it might be something less disastrous on a national level, but disastrous in our own lives to which we want to shake our fists at God and ask why He allows this to happen. Jesus' reply in the Gospel lesson is simple:

"Do you think that these Galileans (or anyone else you care to name) were worse sinners than all the others, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will likewise perish."

At the beginning of chapter thirty three of Ezekiel, God has called Ezekiel to be a "watchman". The job of the watchman is to warn the city of impending doom. While other false prophets were preaching long life for Jerusalem, a sort of "happy days are here again" message to the people, Ezekiel was called to preach a message of repentance. In other words, he was given the message to preach that the people of Judah and Jerusalem should "turn and live".

However, if the people chose to ignore Ezekiel's message, then the blame would not and could not fall at his feet. He would not be responsible for what happened to them. But if he failed to give the message, to sound the alarm, then he himself would be responsible for what happened to the people to whom he was sent to warn.

But sometimes the message from God still seems unfair, or at least unreasonable, doesn't it? We may think that God is unfair because He allows bad things to happen to good people in the world. But the fact of the matter is, we ALL deserve nothing but death and eternal punishment in hell, don't we? One grandparent from my previous congregation gave me this reply to use when Grace starts saying "It's just not fair!" She said that she told her children if life were *really* fair, then we would all end up in hell, wouldn't we? We face a perfect, holy, just and righteous God, and we certainly can't get around the punishment that we deserve. Each one of us sins every day, and we very well might expect that a righteous and holy God should and does punish us for what we do wrong.

But I want to remind you of what God had said to Ezekiel as I read it to you at the beginning of my sermon. God says, "I have NO DESIRE in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live..." God desires our repentance. Although it's true that we sin much every day, God doesn't desire or seek our death because of it. On the contrary, He tells us to "Turn and live". In other words, we should repent or perish. God doesn't want us to cling to our own worthless deeds. He doesn't want us to make bloody sacrifices in order somehow to "pay our way" into heaven. Rather, God desires that we all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

And just what is that truth? The truth is that even though we cannot possibly ever earn our way into heaven, even though we can't buy our way past the pearly gates, the way has ALREADY been paid. The Bible says "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." Death, the punishment and consequence of our sin, was dealt with by His Son's death and resurrection. We don't need a ticket. We don't need to make installment plans in order to get out of hell. The debt has been paid in full by Jesus, who suffered hell and death on the cross so that we might live.

As a pastor, I have seen many people pass away rather suddenly as our Lord called them to glory to be with Him (including my own mother at the age of sixty-three). I can say without a shadow of a doubt that none of the men or women that I have laid to rest was perfect (not even my mother). I can say with all certainty that all of us, myself included, are sinners. But I can say with just as much certainty that we have all been forgiven and set free because of what God has already done for us through Jesus' suffering and death on the cross.

But it doesn't just end there, does it? We don't just continue in our sin and our wicked ways, do we? God had Ezekiel give this warning to us all:

"Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die."

God's grace and mercy is not a license for us to sin. We live with repentant hearts and according to our heavenly Father's will because of all that Jesus has done for us. We don't do good works to obtain salvation, because that would be impossible. We do good works because we have been saved by God through faith in Jesus Christ alone. We come before God's altar with repentant hearts, seeking His forgiveness because we have the assurance that when we hear the words of Absolution and forgiveness spoken by me or another called and ordained servant of Christ, we can believe and trust that it is as if we are receiving forgiveness from Jesus Christ Himself. It's like the canticle that we sometimes sing that says:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence,
And take not Thy holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me, the joy of Thy salvation,
And uphold me with Thy free Spirit."

"It's just not fair?" Of course it isn't. If God is unfair in all of this, it's only because He shows us grace and mercy. Thank God that He has done this for all of us for Jesus' sake, Amen.

And now the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord, Amen.