

Sermon, September 27, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our good friends Hank Lewis and Sean Beachy who are providing Special Music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases, COVID hospitalizations and deaths are still rising, and many, if not most of our members are either in high-risk groups, or they spend time with friends and family members who are.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. I would be glad to show you how. Even if they don't care for the service, I bet they would like just seeing you. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps) Now today's stupid joke.

Once again, as the nights get cooler and the leaves are starting to turn, I realize another birthday is rapidly approaching. The older I get, I've been told to expect three things. First thing I can expect is that my short-term memory will likely decline. And I don't remember the other two things. A retired friend asked me what my NEXT career is going to be. I said, "Cleaning mirrors." He said, "Cleaning mirrors? Why?" I said, "I don't know. It just sounds like something I could see myself doing."

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. God of love, you know our frailties and our failings. Give us your grace to overcome them; keep us from those things that harm us, and guide us in the way of salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.

A reading from Ezekiel, the eighteenth chapter.

The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? 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.

Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. 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. Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord GOD.

Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!

Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

Here ends the reading.

The holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twenty-first chapter.

When [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. What do you think?"

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

This has been a busy week, so I'm glad the issues in today's readings are so simple. In our first reading from Ezekiel, God said people are punished for their own sins and NOT those of their parents. "Well, duh!"

And today the Gospel reading says it's better to do what God asks even if you said you wouldn't, than to say you WILL do what God asks but then you don't. Well that's kind of a no-brainer too, isn't it? In fact I thought maybe we could go home early today. But then I worried that you may not know a whole lot about Ezekiel, either the prophet himself or the fascinating book credited to him. Let's fix that.

The book of Ezekiel is the third of the so-called Major Prophets of the Hebrew Bible, along with Isaiah and Jeremiah. Even if you never really read the Old Testament, parts of THIS book may sound familiar. Because more than a few of the weird visions described in the Book of Revelation appear to have come directly from Ezekiel. The Apostle Paul quotes the book a couple of times too, as does the old African American spiritual, "Dem Bones, dem bones, dem dry bones."

Still Ezekiel is the least known and least understood of the Major Prophets, probably because so much of it is just so...darned...weird. The book appears to date from the sixth century BCE leading up to the

fall of Jerusalem and then through the middle of the Babylonian Captivity.

The book includes bizarre visions. There are oracles of doom concerning Jerusalem, the Southern Kingdom of Judah and many of its neighbors; as well as visions of a restored Holy City and rebuilt Temple.

In chapter one the author describes an odd vision of a large flying object with flashing lights that could move in any direction and had living creatures inside it. Erich von Daniken was the author of a popular 1960s book about ancient alien astronauts called *Chariots of the Gods*. Von Daniken thought aliens probably visited Ezekiel in a spaceship.

Others wondered if the prophet somehow time-traveled, catching a glimpse of a modern-day military helicopter. Josef Blumrich was a NASA engineer at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Alabama at the time. He set out to disprove those claims, spending countless hours studying the biblical text and the Hebrew words the prophet used to describe what he saw. In the end, Blumrich finally came to the conclusion... **THEY WERE RIGHT!** He did see a helicopter!

And he thought the detailed Chapter One vision of a moving wheel within a wheel that never veered off course was likely a modern inertial navigational gyroscope. You know...the kind you might find today...on a space ship...or a modern-day military helicopter.

Along with the odd visions, Ezekiel the book also has more than its share of bizarre and unintelligible words and phrases. Respectful scholars call those hapax legomena, meaning “words said only once” that appear nowhere else in the Bible or any other Hebrew literature. Less respectful folks called them “Gibberish.” At least some Rabbis and Hebrew scholars USED to think that.

The book also has a lot of odd word FORMS and apparent misspellings. In fact at one time The Rabbis suspected the author was barely literate.

In chapter one the author describes heaven, some bizarre-looking heavenly creatures, and seeing God face-to-face. Ezekiel refers to God's appearance as "Hashmal." And nobody had any idea what that word meant. But Jews have long-believed approaching God's physical presence was something akin to setting foot in a nuclear reactor. And actually seeing God's face meant instant death. In fact it says as much in Exodus Chapter thirty-three.

The word hashmal, by the way, eventually became the modern state of Israel's Hebrew word for "electricity." (Cool!) I mentioned that rabbis USED to think a lot of Ezekiel's words were gibberish. But language scholars have since learned more about the vocabulary and syntax of Syriac and Akkadian, the languages of ancient Israel's neighbors.

Turns out some of the prophet's weird words weren't misspelled or made-up after all. They were just words borrowed from other languages. Heck, we do that all the time! N'est ce pas?

Still the book's content remains peculiar, as does the prophet himself who is arguably the strangest character in the Bible. A Priest by trade, the prophet's full name was Y'hezekel ben buzi. Yehezkel in Hebrew means "God's strength" or "God will strengthen." Ben Buzi literally means "son of the hated one." Needless to say, it rarely shows up in baby names books.

Ezekiel lived around the same time as the Prophet Jeremiah, who we know at times was called, "the hated one."

So some think y'hezekel may have been Jeremiah's son, even though Jeremiah claims he never married. (well, that happens...) Others over the centuries have wondered if Ezekiel was really Jeremiah himself; assuming an alter-ego and pen name to describe those weird visions when he was having one of his "spells."

Which he apparently had quite often. The book says the prophet would go completely silent for long periods of time, usually just after seeing strange things and saying strange words. Ezekiel's rantings and surrealistic visions are unmatched in the Bible or other period writings. In fact, more than a few advanced college degrees have been earned with dissertations or theses purporting to diagnose his apparent medical and / or psychiatric condition.

Some have suggested Adams-Stokes Syndrome, a heart rhythm disorder that, untreated, leads to frequent fainting spells, with or without convulsions. Others have suggested paranoid psychosis or schizophrenia. Still others have mentioned temporal lobe epilepsy, specifically pointing to Geschwind Syndrome, which is a constellation of unusual behaviors that appear between seizures.

They include hyper-religiosity (Yep—that would be Ezekiel) and hypergraphia—the compulsive writing of often odd and nonsensical stuff. Geschwind folks also demonstrate what psychologists call "viscosity" (meaning they repeatedly cross normal social boundaries in both writing and conversation.)

I have studied the book of Ezekiel quite a bit over the years, and I must admit-- that sure sounds like him. Because of his sometimes very adult language and boundary issues, the rabbis of the Talmud, the collection of ancient rabbinic writings, advised no man be allowed to read the Book of Ezekiel before age 30. Especially chapter 16. (Which I bet

some of you are now going to do.) Relax--most English translations have toned down the otherwise graphic erotic imagery, to PG-13 level.

Today's reading is thankfully rated G, but it is not without controversy too. God told y'hezekel to make people stop repeating the proverb, "the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." By the way, God told Jeremiah the same thing in chapter 31.

Setting teeth on edge is a common reaction to eating something sour. So that proverb was a clever way of saying that God punishes children for bad things their parents do. Exodus Chapter twenty says as much. But today God said, "No, I don't do that."

That doesn't mean people don't suffer from the sins of others. Of course they do. Bad decisions and bad behavior can indeed have negative consequences for both friends, neighbors AND families. But that is not God's will. And certainly not God's doing.

Some folks consider Ezekiel primarily a Prophet of death and doom. And based on today's reading that's understandable. But I don't read him that way. Because Ezekiel also wrote of a God willing to forgive and forget. A shepherd willing to search for lost sheep. A God not so hung up on pointing fingers, but in the end helping those who are struggling. Yehezkel knew the God who sometimes DOES deliver harsh judgments, also promises an age of peace and prosperity, in a land free of suffering where justice prevails. Maybe not in his own lifetime. Heck, for that matter, maybe not in ours either.

But in those odd words and bizarre visions the prophetic "son of the hated one" manages to paint a beautiful picture of love and hope and promise. You know... along with the helicopters and spaceships and inertial navigational gyroscopes.

Which FINALLY brings me to Matthew's parable of the two sons. It seems pretty straight forward—actually doing God's work is better than just paying lip service to it. But it turns out the earliest manuscripts disagree on who, in the end, really was the better son. Scholars explain that Jesus' question to the chief priests and elders was a trick question where neither answer was actually correct.

They say to refuse any request from one's father in the patriarchal culture of the ancient Near East would be shameful--the equivalent of family treason. It would dishonor both your father and mother, violating the laws of Moses. Therefore even if you eventually changed your mind, that initial refusal itself was an affront to God. In fact, the book of Deuteronomy specifies that if a Jewish son is stubborn or rebellious toward his father, he should be dragged to the outskirts of town and stoned to death. (Thankfully when I was growing up that rule wasn't enforced by Presbyterians.)

So in the end, I guess both sons came up short. Because when God asks, BOTH our actions and our intentions are important. God's will is that we love and honor God in all we do, and our neighbors as ourselves. Remembering that the love that God EXPECTS from us is not just a noun. It is also a verb. Because love is not just something we feel or think. Love is also exemplified in what we do.

Amen.