Lent 5, March 29: Ezekiel 37:1–14

Other Lessons: Psalm 130; Romans 8:1–11; John 11:1–45 (46–53)

We don’t often hear Ezekiel in our lectionary. We only have a handful of them throughout the 3-year cycle, and 2 of those readings (ch33 and 37) are repeated on 2 different Sundays, so we really don’t get a lot of exposure to Ezekiel. But looking at their situation, especially as a pastor, I cannot help but see some similarities between the Israelite people’s situation in this book and our life now today. The people were in exile after they lost to the Babylonians (this was the first wave as Jerusalem and the temple was not destroyed yet). The prophet Ezekiel himself was among this group of people being deported to a foreign land. They lost everything as they were forced to move to another country, their homes, land, livelihood, culture, family, and above all, they lost “worship”. Even if they wanted to worship and offer sacrifice, they cannot. All they could do was to pray privately in the foreign land (as Daniel did), or in small groups in their homes. Indeed, even if they could take a plane and return back to the temple in Jerusalem (which had not been destroyed yet), it would be of no use, for Ezekiel had told them back in ch10 that the glory of God had departed from the temple. God no longer was with them in Jerusalem. They could burn a thousand lambs but there was no God to forgive. We too are stuck in a difficult situation. Though only for a little while, we are not able to worship. Some of us have lost their jobs because of this pandemic. Uncertainty and the fear that it brings weighs down upon us all, as it did with the people in Ezekiel’s time. BUT there is a huge difference between these Old Testament people and us, and Ezekiel's message for today tells us why that is.

First we should understand the basic structure of the book, which is divided into 3 parts: the first 24 chapters is God’s judgment and condemnation upon his people, the second part from ch25-32 is God’s indictment on the other nations surrounding Israel (God does not only look at the sins of his people Israel, but of all people, to show that God is fair and just, which was an accusation from Israel against God!), and the last part from ch33 to the end is God’s promise of restoration for his people and Jerusalem.

But the words in the first part were so harsh that the people have lost all hope and it was not without a good reason. The people had been sinning and failed to believe in God’s salvation and repent of their evil. God had sent multiple prophets to call them back but they would not, and this had been going on for about 500 years (since the time of Solomon). But now, God’s has had enough. In essence he was saying, “Because you love evil and all your wicked ways, because you would not believe in my goodness and love and mercy for you and you fail to worship me in the proper way to receive the forgiveness of sins, but would rather go after the other useless and false gods, then I will leave. You do not want to worship me, fine, now you will not be able to worship me even you want to. I will utterly destroy everything so there is nothing for you.” And that’s what happened, they trusted in the false gods that did not help them when the true God sent Babylon to overtake them. Many people died and the land was ravaged by war, and eventually the city and the temple would be destroyed. They would be left with shame and deep darkness of despair.

God’s judgment was so severe that the people would not believe that God would care and save them. That’s why they say with such despair and hopelessness, as God quotes them in v11: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.” Certainly in this time of global crisis, when everyone is deeply and directly affected, many people feel that same. Those who are actually sick may not get treated or even tested. Some patients for other kinds of disease have to postpone their surgery. The economy is affected, many people have lost their jobs, employers are losing money. I don’t need to go on as you hear about it everyday on the news. Now, I certainly am NOT a prophet as though I get these direct messages from God, and I am certainly NOT saying that this coronavirus is the work of God as he did with the Israelites by sending the Babylonians upon them. HOWEVER, this is certainly the time for reflection and repentance. Have we also come to the point where God has made it so that we cannot come for public worship? “But not everyone is unfaithful,” you may say, “so why are we suffering with the rest?” Yes, that is true, but oftentimes when there is even 1 unfaithful person, the whole people of God are affected. Are we now suffering the consequences of our sins? I do not know, but I know that we still need to repent, as I have said in last week’s sermon. Jesus tells the people who thought they were just outsiders and observers of other people’s misfortunes: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (Lk13)

This is a time to reflect on what is truly important in life and to repent of our ways, to turn from our many false gods that have led us away into death. Hoarding and “panic buying” doesn’t seem to be a problem now, though I still see empty shelves for the toilet paper (it’s been over 2 weeks!) but people still put their trust in what they have, in how much they have stored in their pantry or in their bank accounts, rather than in the God who provides. As my good friend pastor says “In dire times, the devil loves to sow discord and strife. Everyone comes up with a reason for disobedience and selfish gain. The Devil would want nothing more than that everyone fends for himself and each looks solely to his own security and comfort. The temptation is certainly there. We must all learn to restrain the evil desires of the flesh, the sinful selfish thoughts such as ‘I need this or that more than the next person, so it’s reasonable to do this or that.’”

Moreover, for most of us, we are now suddenly thrown into a new lifestyle, namely, being stuck at home, and unable to come to church. How has this affected us on a spiritual level? Have we become lazy and complacent about the church? Yes, we have suspended our services but this is not because we are a “non-essential” service. The world may see the church as “non-essential” or even unnecessary, but let not the world define what the church is and her importance in the life of the Christian. We have more time to spend at home, so use that time to pray more, to study the word more. And remember too, that while you are not going to church, the church still needs money to support the ministry. So according to your abilities, set aside some money in the church offering envelopes each week, so that when the church reopens, you can bring continue your financial support for this ministry (there is also an option to donate online, please ask the pastor the details). Money is always a sensitive topic, but why should it be? Everything comes from God. The gift of a job is given not only for yourself, but for you to serve the neighbor and your family. Money is just part of this process through which God provides for his people. Have money, have the loss of money and income taken hold of our hearts? In these difficult times, it may actually be a blessing, as it reveals and shows to us who/what our gods truly are. These are the many things that we must think about and repent, especially as Holy Week is approaching. It is very likely that we will not be able to have public service for Palm Sunday and Holy Week and Easter Sunday. This is very sad, but God has not abandoned us.

The prophecy of Ezekiel was a sign and a promise of Israel's restoration. From chapter 33 and on until the end in ch48, God gives them many great promises. Even in their midst of sin, even when they have just started to suffer the punishment from God, God was very quick to assure them that this punishment was not indefinite. They would come back from exile, they would rebuild the temple and the city, and the great shepherd would come (ch34). For God has no pleasure in man’s death, but that they would repent and live (ch33). Then in ch36, he promises to put his spirit in his people (cf Joel2:28-29). But will the people believe all these? To them who were so crushed in body and spirit, these words were almost too good to be true. So here in ch37, God brings Ezekiel into this valley of dry bones and show them that God has the power to bring the dead to life, even when their bones are very very dry, and that he truly does desire to bring life to his people who felt that they are as good as dead.

And the way God brings life is by his word. The word of God is not empty “winds/breaths”, but it does what it says, it gives what it promises. God calls Ezekiel to preach his word, he sent prophets to bring this powerful and effective word to his people. And this same word is proclaimed to you as well. What was promised to them came 70 years later, when they would actually return and rebuild. They had to hope and believe in something quite distant. But what has been promised to us has already come and is here for us. It is not something 70 years in the future. Indeed, God did not promise that the virus will go away. And no, God did not promise that we will always have a good and comfortable life, with health and wealth. What he promised is himself, that he is with us until the end of the age. This is the promise that Ezekiel was pointing forward to. Everything in the Old Testament culminated in this, the returning of the exiles, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple, all this was for the Christ to be born, so that he could die and rise again for the sins of the whole world, so that you today would have the spirit of God to believe, have the forgiveness of sins, and live. God has put his spirit in us, so that we always have Christ, we always have God with us, Emmanuel. This is the greatest gift, greater than anything else in this world.

Yes, the government can help you financially with subsidies. The doctors and nurses and medical experts will help us in all our bodily needs. And we ought to be thankful to God for these earthly institutions and their faithfulness in their vocations for our good. But let us not forget where true life and the source all goodness comes from. And needless to say, money and the things of this world cannot provide you with security and peace. Psalm 146 tells us not to put our “trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.” But Ezekiel reminds us with this strange and yet wonderful story that God does care for his people. The one who can save us is the one who died on the cross and rose from death to life for the forgiveness of our sins. So now though we wait in this desperate and dire situation, we do not need to despair like the Israelites who cannot and perhaps refuse to see a gracious God before them. We can see properly because the spirit of God has been poured out upon us all. The spirit creates faith in us through the hearing of God’s word. So continue to live in that word.

As we now struggle with this new life (both spiritually speaking and this pandemic), let us not forget that the life of the Christian is one of daily repentance. As we face new challenges, we will inevitably also face new temptations. Cling to Christ and know that the spirit of God is in you to help you. During these times when we are isolated, we are not alone. Jesus is with you. Live in him. Believe, repent, and pray.