

23rd Sunday after Pentecost November 8, 2020
Ezekiel 33:30-33
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“On the seventh day God finished all the work that had been done in Creation, and God rested and blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.”

The Sabbath is sacred; it is given to us as a blessing, a day of rest, a day to worship and honour God, a day to stop ordinary work, and rejoice in the love that surrounds us.

It is a day to hear the Word of God, calling us to justice, righteousness and peace, to remember that we are God's family.

The exiles in Babylon were not doing that. They didn't know how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. They heard the words, but they didn't follow them. . And so Ezekiel, the prophet, was sent to lead them back into God's grace.

In order to understand how they got this way, we have to hear a bit about the prophet, and why he was called by God to help these frightened, lonely, confused people, who were living in a land not their own, who didn't know what the next day would bring, who had no sense of purpose.

And as we hear this story, we may find ways to connect ourselves to what is going on in our lives in this time.

Ezekiel was born into a well to do family, and he became an important leader in the Temple in Jerusalem as a priest. Then Babylon began to attack the city, he was taken away, along with many of the most prominent people: the king and some of the princes, other leading citizens, workers who were prized for their ability to create beautiful buildings - people who would be of use in Babylon, and whose work would be missed in Jerusalem. Sometimes, we think of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its people as one single event, but it took place over several years, until hardly anyone except the very old, the sick, the ones who had no means of support, were left.

Ezekiel was one of the first to be removed, and he was put in the Jewish settlement along a canal and called by God to give support to the people who had lost so much. They didn't understand why this was happening: they had listened to the false words of comfort from other prophets, because they didn't want to believe that this could be happening to them – the words that assured them that Babylon would be destroyed, that all this would soon be over, and they would be able to return home.

Well, that didn't happen, and, like many of us today, they wondered how long this would all last. It turned out to be about seventy years, and they needed to find ways to get on with their lives, with all the changes and challenges they faced.

They felt cut off from God, stressed out, lost. For most of his time in Babylon, and maybe even before, Ezekiel had dreams and visions of what needed to be done. He would do strange things, go into long periods where he didn't speak. He told people some of his experiences, and they often turned away. We would too. We don't like bad news.

But he was a person of great faith, with a strong sense of God's presence. He believed in the old forms of prophecy, in the holiness of God's call, and he was sent to remind everyone of the moral demands of God's law, of the importance of their responsibilities, of the way they should show personal devotion in their daily worship.

Did they listen? No, of course not. In today's short passage, God reminds Ezekiel that the people would come in great crowds to listen to him, but they would not act on his message. They were not interested in holiness or commitment; they were only looking for entertainment. Ezekiel was like a singer of popular songs with a beautiful voice, whose message is empty and doesn't move the world along in a positive direction. They wanted easy answers, a quick fix for their problems, without putting in much effort to help themselves in the crisis of exile. They wanted to hear about economic gain, not about obedience to God and the Law.

The Sabbath worship would not bring them comfort, or a sense of purpose, or peace of mind and soul, or the blessings of God.

And yet, there was hope. The community of people from Jerusalem learned how to live in that strange land, and they found new ways to strengthen their faith, to worship more simply without all the surroundings of the great Temple. They gathered in small house groups, not in large crowds, and began to appreciate the comforts of tradition, the importance of ritual, to find security in the past, so that they could look toward the future with renewed hope. Ezekiel helped them to focus on what was important; he lifted the spirits of the exiles so they could survive and flourish.

We are in the same sort of condition today. We may feel like exiles, not allowed to go out of the house, we can't gather in large groups, we are cut off from our families and friends, we are hemmed in by Covid 19.

We may feel that the authorities have taken away all the fun: no more big family parties during the holidays, no big weddings, and maybe worst of all, no singing in church, and no way to grieve when someone dies. No hugging for comfort, no sharing food and friendship. Events that we took for granted last year cannot happen now.

And we wonder how to worship, sitting at home, watching the computer screen. Will God still be there? How will we practice our faith, in an empty room? Yet this is how we will begin to slow, and eventually stop the spread of Covid 19, if we listen to the people who are able to help us with their knowledge, their encouragement and especially with their compassion.

This is the Sabbath, the time of blessing. We are still God's family, and this is the day to rest, and to remember and rejoice. Of course it's different, and now is the time to think about what is really important as we set aside this time to worship.

This is our special time to focus on God, on the messages of justice and peace, on what inspires us to carry on in our daily lives. Here we find healing, comfort and challenge.

More than ever, we need to remember the past, not what was lost, but what is still with us. Now more than ever, we need to embrace the familiar prayers, and songs, and Scripture passages that tell us of God's love.

This is still a time of blessing, because we are given the opportunity to take what is best and change and experience new ways to worship and live. It is a time to take God's words seriously, not as entertainment, but as a guide to the future, a promise of grace. In the section of the bulletin on spiritual practices, there are a number of ideas to help you to fully engage in worship, to become active participants even in your chair, to enjoy the prayers, the silence and to sing your hearts out as the words come on your screen. Work with your heart, to let God fill you with peace.

Every year, many ministers wonder what to do about Remembrance Day. How do we satisfy the needs of the people in the congregation? How do we fit in with the community activities, what happens if we offend someone by celebrating, what happens if we don't mention it and someone else feels ignored?

I like to do what is in my heart in this time, and this year, what is in my heart is a recognition that we are all grieving for a way of life that may not ever be the same again. We need to have the celebrations, the customs, the worship that anchors us to times past and brings us comfort.

And I think that the traditional Remembrance Day rituals are a good thing today, even though November 11 is on Wednesday, because it's a time to be with family, and no matter where we are, we are a church family gathering for prayer. Most people will not be able to gather in person for services of remembrance, because wise choices have been made to keep everyone in our community healthy and safe. So we will be together in spirit, saying the prayers, having a moment of silence, listening to the music, and taking time to remember the sacrifices made by those who fought for a better world, even as we think about how to support those who are working for peace, justice, healing an acceptance in our world community today.

Because we are all in this together. Covid 19 doesn't see the differences of religion, race, culture, economic status, sexual preferences. We have all become one people in our suffering, and maybe that will lead to peace. Like the exiles in Babylon, we will learn how to do this if we cooperate. We are connected through the ages to all who have suffered, and overcome it, with God's grace and with our own determination and holy hope.

It is traditional to take this time to remember those who died in past wars, but I think also of all the families who were left behind to mourn, or those who returned wounded in body and spirit, of the destruction of land, and the social changes that were forced upon people.

And in the past few weeks, I have thought about the Canadian military today, and what they are doing in this time, as they serve our country and so many other places in the world that need support and care. There are about 68,000 men and women in active service, and another 27,000 who are reservists.

They are serving in the Middle East, providing maritime security in the Arabian Sea, assisting local security forces in Iraq and Syria. They are part of a multinational force of observers in the Sinai Peninsula and part of UN truce supervision.

In Europe, Canadian forces are part of NATO missions. They are involved in peace and support operation in Africa,

And in Canada and other parts of North America, troops are assisting in communications systems in the Arctic, in search and rescue operations, and in areas where this pandemic has needed personnel, or where natural disasters have occurred.

As a country, we are committed to peace, as a people, we must always think in terms of what affirms life rather than destroying it.

Remembering and honouring the past helps us to make the best choices for the future. Like the people in Babylon, separated from a familiar way of life, we need to turn to God and God's law, to the ceremonies and rituals which give us strength, to celebrate the blessings of God.

In these moments of remembrance, may we all hear God's word with reverence, pay attention to the voices of the modern prophets whose knowledge and caring lead us to the restoration of life, and vow to serve God with actions that bring new life, health and wholeness to all God's people. May we sing the Lord's song in this strange time - even if we have to do it only in our hearts - so that God's presence can bring us joy.

Amen