Sermon for September 27, 2020

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Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

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.

Matthew 21:23-32

23When [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?” 24Jesus 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. 25Did 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?’ 26But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 27So 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.  
  28“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31Which 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. 32For 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.”

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in abundance, dear people of God, from God our creator, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

And from your other ELCA siblings in Christ, some 45,000 folks spread across the Indiana-Kentucky Mission Territory, greetings and woo-hoo in the name of Jesus!

How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb?

Change?

I know, it’s an old joke, and not a very good one. But, as with many jokes, we find ourselves chuckling at it – at least a bit – because it reveals some truth about us. After all, we Lutheran Christians have a reputation for resisting change.

Apparently, so did our ancestors in faith, those ancient exiles to whom the prophet Ezekiel spoke centuries ago.

Stuck in exile and offered new possibilities by the prophet, the people retreat into an old adage that suggests they are stuck with their situation:

“The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

Our ancestors appear to be using a traditional proverb about the effect of parents’ behavior on children in order to resist taking responsibility for changing their own behavior in response to their current situation.

God comes offering new possibilities beyond the horizons of their current predicament and, taking refuge in the limited possibilities of a situation imposed on them, the people claim that “the way of the Lord is unfair.” Or, as the CEB translates their claim, “The way of the Lord doesn’t measure up.”

Biblical scholar, Margaret Odell, suggests that, in the midst of the known, if challenging, realities of their current situation, “the exiles protest God’s unfathomability [the inability to fully fathom or understand God and God’s promises] – as if they prefer the tidiness of a self-limiting proverb to the mystery of God’s offer of new life.”[[1]](#endnote-2)

The promise of new life is so incomprehensible within the framework of their tradition and their current situation that the exiles resist even the possibility that God promises.

Change?

The prophet pleads with them to accept the new life God offers in the midst of their dilemma:

*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.*

Turn, then, and live.

…

Dear people of God, despite our joke-worthy resistance to change, if anyone should be able to turn and live, to embrace and live into the new – though different – life that God is able to work even in the midst of the worst challenges and tragedies, even in the midst of pandemics, unrest, and uncertainty…if anyone can turn and live into something new, it’s those who have passed through the baptismal waters.

We have died with Christ and are raised with Christ to new life through the washing of water and Word. Every day, we walk with Jesus deep into Good Friday and burst from the tomb with him on Easter morning.

As the old hymn puts it:

*The Church of Christ in every age, beset by change but Spirit led,*

*Must claim and test its heritage, and keep on rising from the dead.*

Like the parabolic son who said he wouldn’t and then he did, like the tax collectors and prostitutes who will be at the front of the line into God’s reign of justice and mercy, peace and forgiveness, and new, abundant, and lasting life for all…

…we cross-marked Spirit-sealed people can be open to the possibility of new life – as individuals and families, as communities, as church – that is different from our old, pre-pandemic, life.

Certainly, this turn toward life that God calls us to is not without groaning, or birth pangs, or lingering looks over our shoulders toward what once was and what many of us had hoped would always be…

And yet, in the amazing grace of God, as the Old Testament teacher Walter Brueggemann suggests, the groaning can be a gateway to the new creation God offers us, our church, and our world in the midst of and rising out of this wilderness.

﻿“The groan,” Brueggemann says, “is that mark of shock, bewilderment, and recognition that stands between the old world of death and the new world of life. That moment between…cannot be eluded, but is the narrow entry point into new creation. The groan is the gate to the future of God’s new creation.”[[2]](#endnote-3)

The groaning and grumbling, lament and discord that so many of us experience now can actually turn us toward new life, the new world God is crafting, a world of justice, mercy, compassion, peace, and security for all.

…

I have seen this happen all across this synod as leaders and faith communities have turned toward the new life that God promises and gives, even in the midst of their own uncertainty about the future. In the power of the Spirit so many have let go of the need to do things the way they’ve always been done have embraced and experimented with the new creation rising from the rubble of this tragic time.

For example,

* Three small congregations without called pastors in rural southeastern Indiana – St Peter, Bear Branch, Emanuel, Greendale, and St John, Lawrenceburg – very early on worked with a cadre of retired pastors to embrace joint worship that required learning new technologies and letting go of the need to only do worship on their own and drew in worshippers from other neighboring congregations who also do not have called pastors.
* Holy Trinity in Lafayette IN started up a feeding ministry that gave work to a restaurant owner whose restaurant closed down early in the pandemic by providing tasty meals for people in need in the church parking lot.
* In the midst of the pandemic, Christ in Jeffersontown, KY started a brand-new meal ministry that feeds 50 homeless people and families a week.
* Grace and Augustana in Elkhart IN are experimenting with a form of “house church,” small, local, distanced and masked, gatherings who pray together, worship together, and are visited once a month by the pastor for the celebration of Holy Communion.

And there are so many other ways, that you, God’s people of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod are turning toward the gift of life in the midst of loss, and grief, and uncertainty. I am inspired by you…and I see God’s unfathomable promise being fulfilled in and through you.

…

The Netflix series “Greenleaf” is the fictional story of the sometimes unscrupulous world of the Greenleaf family and the sprawling Memphis megachurch that they lead. In the series finale, after significant trauma in the congregation and the death of its lead pastor, his wife, Lady Mae, who is also a pastor, preaches at her husband’s memorial service.

Some of you will chuckle when I tell you that the text for her sermon is Isaiah 43:19.

Mae quotes the prophet who, like Ezekiel preached to people in exile:

*I am about to do a new thing…do you not perceive it?*

With stirring energy, she invites God’s people to dream together “not about what the church has ever been, but about what has never been.” She reminds us of the ways God has always done things, new things that are far beyond the imagination of current contexts…tongues of fire descending in a small upper room…one innocent man dying to bring life to all people…

And she prays for the new and unimaginable future that God promises:

*Lord God, I’m asking you right now:*

*Show me forgiveness where there can be none;*

*redemption where it’s far too late;*

*waters where the wells long ago ran dry;*

*acceptance where there is hate.*

*I want you to make me what I can’t become…*

*I moan and groan to you, Jesus, and I can pray, “Please, please, make me new.”*

She turns again to the gathered assembly she says:

*We’ve been through so much…*

*And we’re asking God to help us learn to love our past enough to let it go, and to move forward.*

*I want to move forward, Lord God, forward into the future.*

*Say it with me, “Jesus, Jesus, make me new.”*

Turning to an altar call that is familiar in some Christian traditions, Mae echoes ancient prophets:

*Come, lay down whatever is keeping you from the new idea, anything keeping you from the newness of God, anything keeping you from being the best new you you can be [in Christ]. Lay it on the altar and let Jesus make you new…like a newborn baby.*

Turn, then, and live.

Dear people of God, the promise and the invitation echo down through the centuries from Ezekiel and Isaiah to burst from the tomb of Jesus into our coronavirus wilderness, calling us to turn and live…

…to lay down at the altar all that keeps us from embracing the newness God offers, even now, to entrust ourselves, our lives, our families, our church, our world to the promise we see in the crucified and risen one, and to walk together with him and with one another through the groaning Good Friday gateway into the coming Easter reign of God – where all is made new with justice and peace, hope and healing, and abundant life for all.

Turn, then, and live.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

1. “Working Preacher” app, September 28, 2014 – Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Brueggemann, Walter. Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty (p. 66). Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)