

SERMON: Ezekiel 36:23-28
A CHANGE OF SPIRIT, A CHANGE OF HEART

I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD," says the Lord GOD, "when I am hallowed in you before their eyes.

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.

What do we celebrate on Pentecost? Is Pentecost the day the Holy Spirit first came upon the disciples? Yes, and No. Yes, on Pentecost, the disciples first spoke about Christ with boldness even against the enemies who had crucified Him. They spoke with new wisdom and understanding concerning the prophecies of the Old Testament. Now they could clearly see how the words of the Old Testament pointed ahead to the Savior to come. And they spoke in foreign languages they had never learned, with the result that the many visitors in Jerusalem could hear in their own tongue the truths of Christ the Savior from sin and death. Great things first happened on Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit! On the other hand, this was not the first time the Holy Spirit had come to them. Scripture tells us that Peter once answered Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" That was a statement of faith. And *No one can say Jesus is the Lord except by the Holy Spirit* (I Corinthians 12:3). A person cannot come to faith/trust in Jesus by his own power, emotion, or thinking, but only by the Holy Spirit. The disciples already had the Holy Spirit who had brought them to faith in Jesus. Pentecost was not the first coming of the Holy Spirit into their hearts and lives. Pentecost was a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit into their hearts and lives, giving them the blessings and tools they needed to proclaim Christ the Savior, to all near and far. Today, on Pentecost, you and I consider all these blessings of the Holy Spirit—bringing each individual to faith in Christ and blessing Christians at large with boldness, wisdom, and tools for spreading the Kingdom of Salvation in Christ.

The text is from the prophet Ezekiel. He lived at the time of the captivity of the tribe of Judah and its capital Jerusalem, taken captive to Babylon. Several Sundays ago we studied from the Prophet Jeremiah who lived at that same time. Jeremiah labored among "lowly" people left behind in demolished Jerusalem. Jeremiah could not understand why God would not relent from His anger against His people. He felt God was being like an unreliable stream—not a steady presence. God corrected Jeremiah and showed him the glory-to-come in the people's repentance and trust the Savior. That was Jeremiah. Today's Ezekiel, on the other hand, labored among the captives in Baby, captive because of their own turning away from God—which they didn't like to admit.

In this Chapter 36 of Ezekiel, God first speaks, in unusual fashion, to the physical "land" of Israel, as if it had ears and could think. He speaks to the mountains, rivers, streams, and valleys which had been dishonored, devastated, and shamed by the Babylonians when they overran the land, took the people Judah away, and gloated over the fact. God told the mountains, etc., that it was indeed Judah's own fault because of its idol worship. Yet God pledged on oath to the mountains that He would bring back its people and the land would prosper again! --- Imagine, if our church were demolished by terrorists—the root cause being our own carelessness about the Savior—and the members were prevented from coming back here. The building would lie in a heap of rubble, and scoffers would taunt both the ruins as well as the dispersed members. Yet, if you were to learn that God spoke a message of prosperity and restoration to the rubble! it would be a thread of hope for you!

In this chapter of Ezekiel, God also spoke in anger to the godless "nations" which grabbed away the land that God had given to His People and then gloated over taking it as their own. God said, "*The nations that are around you shall bear their own shame!*" (36:7). The enemies were going to get theirs! It was yet another message of hope for captive Judah and Jerusalem! In the same way today, all the forces of evil who line up against you—even the devil Himself—al who at times succeed in leading "foolish you" into sin and turning away from God, will have to answer to God and will "get their due"! The day is coming.

Finally, and above all, God addresses the people of Judah and Jerusalem, regarding their own guilt! *I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed throughout the countries. I judged them according to their ways and their deeds* (36:19). There was no point in crying "Unfair!" They were getting what they brought on self. Do you at times listens to the sweet lies of the devil and make wrong choices in life?

Don't cry Unfair when consequences follow, short term, long term, or even lifelong. As a youngster, I often heard, "It's no one's fault but your own."

Every sin mocks the "name" of the Lord. His "name" includes His names by which He identifies Himself, and His "good name" (spotless reputation). God's name is not to be mocked, blasphemed, profaned, or disdained. God's people at that time by their idol worship and by each sin—copying the godless nations around them—profaned God's name. Are you any different? Do you, God's adopted child through the blood of Jesus, follow and copy the godlessness of the crowds? talk like they talk, act like they act, think like they think, do what they do? Such dishonors God. When the people of Judah were taken captive, they continued to profane His name among the captors! No repentance or change before God on their part. Their captors, looking at them, had every reason to continue to make light of God, His Name, and His people.

BUT God say in this text, *I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD,* says the Lord GOD, "when I am hallowed in you before their eyes. Here God offers no longer a thread of hope but a "rope" of hope! God says these enemy nations who have blasphemed His name as a joke because of Judah's waywardness, will sanctify His Name—set it apart as special—when Judah standing before their very eyes will willingly follow Him and "hallow" Him—holding Him in high regard. The nations will be amazed at such a God who changes even worse case examples of "children," like Judah, into those who honor His name! "Things are going to be different!" He said to them. It is the same for a sinner like you!

How will that happen? *Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.* God will remove their sin, washing them clean. Does that sound familiar? "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin!" (I John 1:7). "Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins!" (Acts 22:16). He will turn the wayward hearts of sinners from serving self, to hearts clinging to Jesus, and being served by Jesus, the Promised Savior. They will live for the Lord, not for self. *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.* Instead of the rock-hard stone-cold heart of waywardness within them with no interest in God, He will give them soft, warm hearts of flesh beating in devotion for Him, and for Jesus, Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The extreme love of God for their souls, the love by which He would send His beloved Son to bleed and die for them, would so warm their hearts that they would love and serve Him in return. "We love Him because He first loved us" (I John 4:19). The Gospel message in the hands of the Holy Spirit works a change in man's hard and cold heart.

But there's even more! The change is not a self-generated or a spontaneous combustion type of change, or change by luck or by fate. There is an "agent" who works in the heart, who sows the seed of the Word of Salvation into the heart and then causes it to grow, leading souls to repent of sin, to cling to God's mercy in His Son, and to live for the Savior. This agent is the Holy Spirit! *I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.* The Holy Spirit enters the heart through God's Word. He does not simply "zap" an individual to make a believer, but He works through means, the message of the Gospel—the Good News of salvation in Jesus in the Word, and sacraments (Baptism and Communion). He convinces hearts of their sin, shows them their Savior, and leads them to trust that Savior. Jesus said, "*When the Comforter [Paraclete, Counselor, Helper] is come, whom I will send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He shall testify of Me*" (John 15:26). He will testify of Me! Peace and restoration in Jesus!

Out text says, *Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your father.* The people of Judah were restored to their homeland. After seventy years of captivity, many did go back and rebuild. However, this was not the ultimate fulfillment of these words. The restoration which they experienced would never reach the heights that Ezekiel and the other prophets foretold. The real fulfillment of *You shall be My people, and I will be your God* is reached in heaven. Through the Holy Spirit people turn to the Lord, and the Lord through Christ returns to them their privileged position as members of His eternal kingdom and family. On earth Holy Spirit instills in them faith in Christ the Savior and gives them the blessings and abilities to live for Christ and to proclaim Christ, as He did for the disciples on the first Christian Pentecost. What a change the Holy Spirit works! And what a change in you and your future—a future with the Lord forever. *He [the Lord] will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away* (Revelation 21:3-4).

Today on Pentecost celebrate the fact that run-away hearts, even as yours, are restored to God's good graces in Jesus. You are again His people and He your God! You have a new heart and a new spirit forever, by way of the Holy Spirit! Blessed Pentecost!

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach---