

“Turn, Then, and Live”

Sermon of the Rev. Dan Hatch
Nu’uanu Congregational Church
Sunday September 28, 2008

Scripture: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Text: “*For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.*”

Ezekiel 18: 32

I like to consider Ezekiel as the prophet of the Exile. He had been among the leading priestly families of Jerusalem, which were taken to Babylon when King Nebuchadnezzar first conquered Jerusalem in 597 BCE and tried to set up Israel as a vassal state. In Babylon, Ezekiel first got his call to become a prophet four years later in 593 BCE. The Israelites kept being a thorn in King Nebuchadnezzar’s side, so in 587, he returned and utterly destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, and took all her rebellious rulers to Babylon. Ezekiel continued to prophesy to both those in Babylon and the peasant remainder in Israel until his death in 571 BCE. So much for this morning’s history lesson! Let us see what Ezekiel has to say to us over 2500 years after his death.

In many ways the United States today is not unlike Israel of the sixth century before Jesus’ birth. The biggest difference is that what is destroying this country today is not an external nation like Babylon that was ruled by King Nebuchadnezzar, but it is the greed of our own banking institutions and our unregulated multinational corporations that are destroying us from within—a fact clearly brought to our attention with the recent Wall Street financial shenanigans that have been the major part of the news this past week. Our false temples with their idolatrous worship of money are beginning to implode.

Ezekiel’s Chapter 18 begins with debunking an old proverb that is also quoted by Jeremiah: “The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” History is not always what we would like it to be, but there is nothing to be gained by blaming our parents. That only makes us helpless victims. Ezekiel, speaking on God’s behalf, says, “*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.*” (Ezekiel 18:4). God is concerned with the present generation and how we respond spiritually to the situations in which we find ourselves. Do we respond as those faithful to God or do we respond in sinful ways that separate us from God’s love? Or, stated another way, are we complicit in our sanctioning of the status quo, or are we seeking to live lives obedient to God’s will? That seems to be the choice we are being presented in this next election. Ezekiel’s concern is not with physical death, but spiritual death, which should be our concern as well.

In verses 21 of Chapter 18, which was not included in today’s lectionary selection, Ezekiel clearly states, *if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die.* In other words, God is not as concerned about what we have done in the past, as what we do in the present. Last week only 34.6% of the registered voters on Oahu actually voted. This means that that 2/3rds of the registered voters are complicit in the status quo. Are you one of them?

Jesus said, in Mark 12:17, *“Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* Voting is one of our civic duties as a Christian. If you did not vote, you are part of the problem, not part of the solution, for God speaks to power through your vote. How you vote is between you and God. That you vote should be a concern of the church, the community of the faithful. I hope that Nu’uanu Congregational Church can have a 100% voting record in the General election. Hmm... Maybe we should require a receipt from the poles for admission to the church on Sunday, November 9, the Sunday after the election which just happens to be stewardship Sunday! Needless to say, we will not do so, for Jesus was invitational, not compulsory, but just imagine that a better world would be a little bit more possible if we did.

Ezekiel does not mince his words with those to whom he is speaking. In verse 25, he tells them that they say, *“The way of the Lord is unfair.”* This is victim language, which Ezekiel turns around by proclaiming, *“Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When we start point our finger at others, even God, we need to remember that we have three fingers pointing back at us! Ezekiel goes on: “When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity they have committed they will die. Remember, we are talking spiritual death here. But it cuts the other way as well, as Ezekiel says, “Again, when the wicked turn away from their wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life.”*

Human nature has not changed one iota since Ezekiel assumed the mantel of the prophet almost 2700 years ago. It is not going to change tomorrow. God has endowed us with freedom of choice. It is the same freedom of choice that Moses set before the Israelites as he prepared them to enter into the promise land 600 years before Ezekiel, saying, *I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.* (Deuteronomy 30:19-20) How are you exercising your birthright today as a human being and as a Christian to exercise the freedom of choice with which you are endowed?

Ezekiel, speaking on God’s behalf, clearly spells out to those in captivity in Babylon what it is that they must do. *“I will judge you...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!”*

You, who are in economic captivity today, why will you die? Why will you die, O House of Nu’uanu Congregational Church? You have a choice. God takes no pleasure in your spiritual death. Turn, then, and live anew into the spiritual future God has chosen for you. That is the essence of stewardship of the faith with which you are endowed, and needs to be reflected as an integral part of your gratitude attitude. Amen? Amen!