

May 8, 2011

Ezekiel 37:1-14

1 Peter 1:17-23

“Go On, or Else!”

There is a sign posted at a service station perched on the edge of the Mohave Desert. It proclaims the startlingly simple message: “Stop here, or Else!” It’s a great marketing tool, because of course EVERYONE stops—even people with full tanks of gas and empty bladders. Everyone knows what lies ahead is dangerous and uncertain, so they trust the sign’s warning and stop. Few are so foolish as to barrel by a sign with so brazen a message. We decide to put our trust in what it tells us.

Years back, Percy Ross wrote a “Thanks a Million” newspaper column. He had decided to give away his millions before his death. He received an average of 10 letters a week, and printed selected letters regularly in his column. One came from a gentleman named Wilson Demarest:

Dear Mr. Percy Ross,

You are so generous to help so many people. I am poor too but I get by. I don’t need any money. I live under a bridge and it has a steam pipe so I am warm in winter. There is a diner close by and the dumpster is always got food in that trucks don’t eat. So I got everything and don’t need money. But I see you in the papers and I think if I was rich like you I will help people too. The other day I helped some buddy and he gave me \$20. that is nice but there is some buddy that needs it more than I do I’m shure. \$20 make me rich so I share and try to help you to do good. Please give this \$20 to some buddy that really need it.

Yours truly,

William Demarest

Doesn’t that seem radical? How do we feel about this? William reminds me of Porgy in the musical Porgy and Bess, who sang, “I got plenty of nothin’ and nothin’s plenty for me,” pointing out his freedom from “locks on doors” and the fact that, “the things that I prize, like the stars in the skies, are all free!”

Are we perhaps strangely jealous of Mr. Demarest, who has nothing, yet wants nothing, and is glad to part with his “fortune”? Friends, money is one

of the things we trust the most in this world. We are amazed when we observe someone rejecting it. All people everywhere, from all times and places, experience insecurity and grapple with any number of fears. Where do we put our trust, especially when we are anxious or facing danger and uncertainty?

Often, I expect, we put our trust in money and cultural words of wisdom-like those that appear on the sign by the Mohave Desert. I'm not saying it's totally wrong to have some trust in either of those, but we need to beware of placing ALL our trust in them.

For many weeks now we have been reading through the words of the Old Testament prophets in our Grand Sweep through the Bible, using J. Ellsworth Kalas' materials to guide us through the whole Bible in one year. Our reading has shown us disaster after disaster in the history of the Hebrew people, as they continued to place their trust in a variety of things other than the Lord, Yahweh, the one true God. The prophets warned the people and the powers of coming disaster. They ignored and killed the prophets. Disaster came—conquest of their cities and kingdoms led eventually to exile in Babylon for the Hebrews who remained.

We're still reading Ezekiel, dubbed the "psychedelic prophet" by Kalas. In this morning's text Ezekeil converses with God, who gives him a powerful vision.

Consider the setting: HOPELESS

God took Ezekiel to a valley of bones. The prophet must have thought it was an obvious destination for him. He was the spiritual leader for a people in exile. They were defeated, cut off from their homeland and subject to a foreign king. The valley of bones must have reflected the state of his nation, and maybe of his own soul: dry and dead.

Consider the prophet: CAUTIOUS

God asked Ezekiel, as he looked over the valley, "Can these bones live?" And Ezekiel basically said, "Hey, I don't know, but I expect YOU do!"

Consider the orders: IMPERIOUS

God turned the matter back to Ezekiel. He commanded him to prophesy, giving him the words to speak: "This says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live....and you shall know that I

am the LORD.” God commanded. He didn’t offer various options; he didn’t ask IF Ezekiel WANTED to speak; he just said, “SPEAK THESE WORDS.”

Consider the response: **INDUSTRIOUS**

Ezekiel did as he was told. In EACH instance he did what God commanded. Kalas considers this: “So much good could be done in our world, in our churches, and in our own personal faith growth if only we were willing to do as God commands (in the Scriptures) and would do it without delay....in truth the secret of God’s kingdom is as simple as the old hymn, ‘Trust and Obey.’”

Consider the results: **GLORIOUS**

The hopeless scene becomes a magnificent triumph. The cemetery becomes a parade ground. The place of despair and death is now a place of life and hope.

Our text from the first letter of Peter was read by people who were hurting. Their circumstances were different than those of the Hebrews in exile, but they were also quite difficult. These distant Christians were a tiny, struggling minority amidst a powerful, belligerent pagan culture. Peter knew that for these scattered Christians in Asia Minor there would be no escape from the storms of persecution. But he promised Christ would stand beside them, no matter how violent the storm.

Friends, we trust in many things, but it is hard for us to believe Peter’s message: our trust and our hope is in the Lord.

What does God have to do to get us to claim this truth? To trust in God **ABOVE ALL THINGS!** Above money, possessions, national security, cultural wisdom!!

Think about it. What did God do? He restored the Hebrew people to their homeland. They returned from exile. They rebuilt their capital city, the land flourished. God made dry bones rise from death and live again. God raised Jesus Christ from death! What more do we need?? God’s past, present, and promised future redemptive activity is the basis for our trust in God.

True security in life AND in death is found in reverence and obedience to God, and in holy love for all God’s creation and children. We need to listen

to God, like Ezekiel, and to do what God commands, like Ezekiel. We need to trust God enough to LISTEN and then DO what God says. Then we can watch the results with awe.

I am very excited about this past Holy Week. Folks filled and overflowed the chapel when we gathered for Maundy Thursday worship. We had to try to put EXTRA CHAIRS in there- and if you mentally picture the chapel you can imagine how tricky that was! Many gathered for Good Friday, and we had amazing attendance at the Easter Vigil Confirmation service. Our Easter morning services drew many once again, with chairs needing to be set up in the narthex as people crowded in.

What caused that? Folks have been wondering and asking. I find myself thinking, “Hey, maybe, just maybe, folks LISTENED to God’s prompting and OBEYED.”

God raised Jesus from death. Don’t you think he can raise you to life following divorce? To changes in your behavior and decisions? To new life following a job loss? To new life following graduation from high school? To new life after a diagnosis of serious illness? To new life after the death of a loved one?

God raised Jesus from death. Don’t you think he can raise the church to new life? We need to trust God and obey him. But consider this: trusting God means that, unlike that sign on the edge of the Mohave Desert, God’s command is far more likely to be “Go On or Else!” God calls Christians to be active witnesses and servants in this world, not to pull over to the roadside and wait.

Put your trust in the power of God, instead of the policies of people. And watch the results with AWE! Amen.