

LENT 3 C**“How Can We Live? Turn Back and Live”****Ezekiel 33:10-11**

The pastor of a country congregation was pounding a sign into the ground by the road in front of their church building. The sign read, “turn back before it is too late.” Just then some teenagers were joyriding down that road. They stopped long enough to read the sign and, thinking it to be judgmental, yelled, “hey, preacher, you can’t tell us what to do!” They sped off down the gravel road and around a bend. The pastor heard the squeal of brakes, the crunch of gravel under tires and then a big splash as the car dropped off the road into a shallow creek. He looked at his sign and said to himself, “maybe I should just write, ‘bridge out ahead.’”

Often a warning from God’s Word proclaimed by messengers of that Word is resisted and rejected. That is part of the story of Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry. “Hey, preacher, you can’t tell me what I have done or am doing is wrong.” But we see from this paragraph of our Old Testament passage today that there is another reaction to God’s law at work in our lives. That is the feeling of despair, the sense that I am stuck in my sins with no way out. I cannot possibly be loved or wanted by God because of what I have done. I have out-sinned God’s forgiveness. God has another message in His Word for those so despairing: “turn back and live.” Our God of all life takes no pleasure in the death of a sinner, but that instead we turn from our sin and live in the forgiveness God’s own Son Jesus Christ has won for us.

Sometimes the messenger of God’s Word has to proclaim God’s law against our rebellion. But there are other times when the consequences of our sinful actions have become clearly obvious to us and very painful for our lives. At those times no words of law need to be spoken, it would only be doubling down on a message from God that has been received loud and clear. A relationship has ended through betrayal. An accident has happened by carelessness. An addiction has damaged a life. A cell door has closed for years to come. These are the times when the weight of our sins hangs heavy upon our lives.

So it was for God's Old Testament people in exile. Faithless Judah has been defeated by an ungodly agent of God's wrath. His punishment for their idolatry was inflicted upon them by the Babylonian army. They overran Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and took most of the people away from their homes. At the time of our text despair has set in among the Judean exiles. Their hope is gone. All that is left for them is death. "Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, we rot away because of them." The Hebrew verb used here means decay, stink, stench. God's people exiled in Babylon are feeling the horror of their sin that God's law rightly brings upon us.

Instead of hearing how bad they have been, God's people now need to hear good news. They need a gospel message from their loving God through an appointed messenger of His Word. "Say to the house of Israel, say to them." The first part of this good news is that God still is with them, that He continues to care for them, and that He wants to speak to His punished people. God reveals Himself to the exiled people of Judah through His prophetic spokesman Ezekiel. 600 years later the Lord God, Adoni Yahweh, would reveal Himself fully to the world in the person and work of His own eternal Son living in our human flesh, Jesus the Christ. Today, God's revelation of Himself comes to us in what the ascended Lord Jesus has given to us, His church, His Word and Sacraments. We have the story of our salvation in the Holy Bible. We have the Holy Spirit's claim upon us in our Holy Baptism. We have the body and blood of Jesus present for us in the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of our sins. These means of God's grace give us today what Ezekiel preached and all that Jesus did so long ago.

"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." The God of all life, the God from whom all life comes, does not desire death. It is not part of His creative plan for His creatures or for His creation. We might think, "Of course, God wants the good people to live and be with Him." Whether we think that includes us or not is another thing. But the reality is that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. The truth of life is that the wicked are not them, the other guys, those people, or even you, you or you. The wicked is me, myself and I. It is who we see in the mirror.

But that means that this good news is exactly for each one of us wicked people. God does not want us to die in our sins. Death on account of our wickedness against God's ways is not God's future for us. Death because of our rebellion against God's will is not God's plan for us. That death for our sin, for all sin, already has been died. That punishment for our wickedness, for all wickedness, already has been suffered. The One, the only One, who lived without sin and wickedness has taken that death and punishment upon Himself. That is God's own Son Jesus Christ. His perfect life for us became His sacrificial death in our place. His sacrifice in death then became His victory of life by His resurrection from the dead. We live innocently of sin because Jesus died for us. We live eternally with Him because Jesus lives for us.

God does not want us to die in our sin. But God also does not want us to live in our sin. God loves us so much that He accepts us as we are, but He loves us too much to let us stay that way. We are not to live as if sin were our favorite teddy bear or comforting blanket, something that we hold onto to tightly and never want to give up. God's message whether proclaimed by the prophet Ezekiel, by our Savior Jesus, or by your pastor today, is consistent, "turn back, turn back from your evil ways." We are to quit doing the deeds of darkness, death and the devil. If you want your head to stop hurting, then quit hitting yourself over that head with a hammer. While that might seem to be a silly and extreme illustration, spiritually speaking, that is what we often do to ourselves. We want to do what we want to do. But when we are selfish about our lives, we harm ourselves and hurt those who are around us. Instead, when we want to have God's blessings in our lives, we should follow His will for our lives. To know that will means we need to be where He reveals His will to us, in His Word of the Holy Bible.

In His Son, Jesus Christ, God has taken from us the punishment of our sins. In His Son, Jesus Christ, God has removed the weight of our sins from us. In repentance and by confession we give God our sins because we don't want them anymore. By the power of the Holy Spirit we rather want to turn back, away from our sins, and live with Jesus. He has lived, died and risen from the dead for us. Amen.