

## *Are We Crazy?*

Ezekiel 36:24-28

December 9, 2007

Today's Old Testament reading, which is also the heart of this sermon on the second Sunday of advent, is rather non-traditional. We don't usually think of any story from Ezekiel as one of the great passages at Christmas time. Ezekiel is a prophet we don't spend a lot of time reading and studying. I don't recall any Sunday School lesson from my childhood being based on Ezekiel. I not even sure if I've ever heard a sermon on Ezekiel before – so this might be new ground for all of us! For sure we need some historical background. Ezekiel began his prophetic calling in the city of Jerusalem. But unlike Isaiah, who prophesized the fall of Jerusalem decades before it happened, Ezekiel lived through it. He was one of the people who were carried off into the Babylonian captivity. It was an event of great emotional stress and anxiety. Psalm 137 clearly portrays the mood of those captives:

- <sup>1</sup> *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.*
- <sup>2</sup> *There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,*
- <sup>3</sup> *for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*
- <sup>4</sup> *How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a foreign land? Psalm 137:1-4 (NIV)*

Into this situation came the words of the Lord through Ezekiel. Right there by the river under the poplar trees, Ezekiel continued to be God's person albeit in some rather bizarre ways. The picture on the cover of your bulletin this morning is a drawing of the events of chapter 4 in Ezekiel. You see, sometimes he didn't speak the word of the Lord; sometimes the Spirit let him to act out things of significance. In that picture Ezekiel has used a clay brick to construct a little model of Jerusalem. The Lord used that model to tell the people about the fate of their beloved city. Actually Ezekiel was a wild a crazy guy who did outrageous things to get God's message across. He also told of wild visions such as wheels within wheels or dry bones filling a valley. But there were other times that Ezekiel received more traditional messages from the Lord. And that's the case with our main passage this morning. Listen to it once more, and remember that the people who first heard this were Jewish people who were in captivity in Babylon.

<sup>24</sup> " *For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.* <sup>25</sup> *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.* <sup>26</sup> *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from*

*you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.<sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.<sup>28</sup> You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. Ezekiel 36:24-28 (NIV)*

## **I. THE PROMISE**

From the year A.D. 215 we get our first detailed description of an early Christian Baptism. Hippolytus, a teacher at Rome, writes this:

“At cockcrow, prayer shall be made over the water. The stream shall flow through the baptismal tank or pour into it from above when there is no scarcity of water; but if there is a scarcity, whether constant or sudden, then use whatever water you can find. They shall remove their clothing. And first baptize the little ones; if they can speak for themselves, they shall do so; if not, their parents or other relatives shall speak for them. Then baptize the men, and last of all the women; they must first loosen their hair and put aside any gold or silver ornaments that they are wearing: let no one take any alien thing down to the water with them.”

Now why were early Christians told to remove all their clothing and bring absolutely nothing with them into the baptismal waters? Two reasons:

1. It gives modern preachers a nice “R-rated” sermon illustration.
2. Baptismal nudity is a symbol. What does it mean? Saint Paul alludes to the practice and explains its meaning: Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Symbols, of course, stand for something. They are not the thing itself, but a sign of the thing. Whenever we confuse the religious sign with the thing that it signifies, we run into trouble, just like the driver who so admires a stop sign that he runs right through it. The logic of symbols tells us that what Christians wear (or don’t wear) is not really the important thing. What’s really important is what’s going on underneath the symbols.

And what is going on - or should be going on - underneath the symbolism of dressing up for church? Six centuries before Christ, the prophet Ezekiel wrote of the New Covenant that would be fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ. Listen again to the words in the 36<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel:

<sup>24</sup> *“For I [the Lord] will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the*

*countries and bring you back into your own land.* <sup>25</sup> *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.* <sup>26</sup> *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.* <sup>27</sup> *And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.* <sup>28</sup> *You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God.”* Ezekiel 36:24-28 (NIV)

This word of the Lord from Ezekiel is really clear. Unlike his divine pantomimes, or his practically ineffable visions, the direct word from the Lord that Ezekiel declares is straight-forward. And in the passage that we have before us this morning in chapter 36 we have a magnificent Divine promise. I love the promises that I find scattered all throughout scripture. The thing that makes them so thrilling is that I know all those promises are for me. I hope you are at the place when you read the Bible of immediately grasping that fact that it was written with you in mind, and that the promises in scripture are not detached from your life. They are, in fact, linked to your life in a very personal and intentional way.

When the folks at Campus Crusade declare that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, they are stating a truth. And the truth for us all is stated in this promise in the 26<sup>th</sup> verse. <sup>26</sup> *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.* (vs. 26)

Do you sometimes feel a lethargy? A growing sense of fatigue? A yearning for renewal? A longing for an exuberance that you once had? Well then this promise is certainly for you. A new heart and a new spirit within are what The Lord promises through the prophet Ezekiel.

But wait.... Can we be sure of such a wild promise? Can we hope against hope that what Ezekiel said so many thousands of years ago be sure? Well, we need to look at...

## II. THE SOURCE

Let me just say straight out that the source of this promise is the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit is powerfully working the mind and heart of Ezekiel, and no matter how weird he acts, his words are the message of the all-powerful living God, the Creator of all that is. El Shaddai has spoken through the prophet. He is the source of the promise.

That word, El Shaddai is a Hebrew name for God that means a couple of things:

- First of all it might simply remind you of "El Shaddai", that Contemporary Christian music song by Amy Grant from her 1982 album *Age to Age*.
- Secondly, and obviously more important it is a Hebrew title for God that means "God All-Powerful." This name is found mostly in Genesis in the stories about the early ancestors of Israel.

The All-Powerful Lord has spoken. He alone is the one who guarantees the promise of a new heart and a new spirit within you. Listen to verse 27 again. It's really worth hearing again, <sup>27</sup> *And **I will put my Spirit in you** and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*"

The promise of this heart and spirit is that such newness within your life will revolutionize your priorities. Now, I don't know about you. But that actually sounds kind of scary. I know how many of you don't like change. Well, this is the ultimate change. It announces a new way of thinking and living. It pronounces a new and keen desire to pay attention to the way you live. It proclaims that you will find pure satisfaction in doing things in God's way instead of your own. That's radical. That's definitely a new heart and a new spirit. Finally, what is...

### III. THE RESULT

What might this Divine promise mean for you? What is the heart of this message that comes from our mighty, all-powerful God? What is the resulting change for you? Quite simply stated, this divine promise from an all-powerful God will result in relational closeness to God. Verse 28 in our passage from Ezekiel says this: <sup>28</sup> *You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; **you will be my people, and I will be your God.***

That's a very powerful thing that Ezekiel is proclaiming. I suspect that the people who heard this thought it was a great idea, but they probably didn't have a clue how it was going to be accomplished. In fact, I know they were clueless. History demonstrates that they wanted it, but they didn't really understand it.

A bit of history is in order. After the Babylonian captivity was over...after the people were allowed to return to Jerusalem, they were very aware of what had transpired. They finally got it. They knew that the Babylonian invasion had been a result of their sinfulness. They finally understood what the prophets had been warning them about. The fall of Israel, and of Judah, were the stark reminders of their waywardness. And they determined that it would never happen again. They set up ways in which they would never displease the Lord again. They tried to make sure that they knew and followed the decrees and statutes of the Lord. One group of folk was set up to interpret and to live out the Law of Moses and exactly as possible. They were the models for everyone else of how to live. This was really commendable. It wasn't just theoretical – it was practical and real.

For several centuries these folks were the religious role-models for the people. They still existed in Jesus' day. By then they were known as the Pharisees and the Scribes of the Pharisees. They wanted the people to follow their example so that there would never be another captivity – so that there would never be a reason for the Lord to rebuke His people.

They wanted to make sure that relational closeness would be maintained. And they thought that by following the Law of Moses as closely as possible, that would do the trick.

Jesus obviously took exception with what the Pharisees were doing. They wanted relational closeness, but they didn't understand that the prophets – what Ezekiel – had said. The promise was for a new heart and spirit, not a new legalistic surge.

The gospel tells a different way than what the Pharisees were doing. The Apostle Paul explained it very well in Romans 3. That a look at that passage:  
<sup>21-24</sup>*But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.* Romans 3:21-24 (MSG)

The Pharisees couldn't do it. You can't do it. I can't do it. All we've got to show for our efforts is the "sorry record as sinners." The pure gift of Jesus Christ is the way to the new heart and new spirit within us. In a conversation with his disciples in the upper room Jesus this to say:

<sup>6</sup> *Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup> If you had really known me, you would know who my Father is. From now on, you do know him and have seen him!"* John 14:6-7 (NLT)

Jesus is the life that God wants us to have. He is the means to the truth we need. He is the one through whom comes that Spirit within that makes us want to change and thus be relationally close to the Lord. That's what happened at Pentecost. That's the Spirit within that Ezekiel foresaw.

We have pretty well established that Ezekiel was a crazy guy. But I guess we're pretty crazy too. We've got this notion that a life stained with rebellion and sin is washed clean by grace. We proclaim that Jesus paid the penalty. We declare that we are whiter than snow. We've even got the notion that God can use us by place a new heart and Spirit within us. Are we indeed that crazy? Yes we are! The result so that new Spirit within us is that we are empowered by El Shaddai, and we are in relationship to Him. Jesus promised us that with these words.

<sup>19</sup>“Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup>On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” <sup>23</sup>Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

John 14:19-20, 23 (NIV)

Oh yes! There it is! “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” Wow!

Are We Crazy? Well, we may be fools for Christ, but we are empowered and we are Spirit renewed people. During Advent and all through our days, we need and must EXPECT the awesomely unexpected because of His all-powerful love.

Thank you Ezekiel. Thank you Jesus. Amen!