

¹⁵ *The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶ “Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, ‘Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.’ Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, ‘Ephraim’s stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him.’ ¹⁷ Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.*

¹⁸ *“When your countrymen ask you, ‘Won’t you tell us what you mean by this?’ ¹⁹ say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim’s hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah’s stick, making them a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand.’ ²⁰ Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on ²¹ and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. ²² I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. ²³ They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.*

²⁴ *“My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. ²⁵ They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. ²⁶ I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. ²⁷ My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’ ” (Ezekiel 37:15-28)*

God is Greater than our History

A few months ago, a friend of mine told me about a series of books by a man named Harry Turtledove. In these books, the author imagines what American history would’ve been like if the South had won the Civil War. Today’s text reminded me of that conversation so I looked the series up on the internet. Mr. Turtledove really got into it. He wrote eleven novels that carry his imaginary history from the time of the Civil War all the way through World War II. He imagines the U.S. and the Confederacy fighting each other in World Wars I and II. He postulates Socialist presidents in the North and Nazism rising in the South instead of in Germany. I imagine he made a lot of money writing these books. But you can’t change history. It may be fun to read books that ask “what if?” but only God really knows the answer to the question. We can dream that our country’s history went differently. We can ask what would’ve happened in our congregation or in the Christian Church if things had worked out differently. We can imagine differences in our personal history. But we cannot change the past that brought us to this moment. God doesn’t need to. **God is greater than our history.**

I.

That’s the lesson for us this morning in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel lived in Babylon. God had punished the kingdom of Judah. He sent Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, to conquer and deport most of the people to present day Iraq. But then God sent the prophet Ezekiel to them. God still cared about his people in exile and he made promises to them. Through his promises to them, he makes promises to us. **God is greater than our history. He will bring us out of exile.**

Ezekiel was unique among the prophets. When God spoke through him, he often used actions and visual aids. It was almost like he was talking to us in our modern, television driven age. The visual aid before us this morning seems almost hokey. But it was effective. God told Ezekiel to take two sticks. On one, he was supposed to write **“Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.”** On the other, he was supposed to write, **“Ephraim’s stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him.”** Then he was supposed to hold the sticks so that they were joined in his hand. I’m pretty sure his hand was supposed to hide the place where they came together so that they looked like one stick. .

Then God said that he was going to join Israel and Judah together. This is what made me think of that series by Harry Turtledove. You see, God was asking them to imagine a change in their history. Israel started

out as one country, made up of twelve tribes. But after the death of King Solomon, it split into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. That happened more than 400 years before Ezekiel wrote on his sticks. But it gets worse. More than 100 years before Ezekiel wrote these words, a different empire, the Assyrians, destroyed the northern kingdom. The people of Israel went into exile and they never came back.

But God told Ezekiel, **“I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel.”** Instead of us trying to imagine a world without a unified United States, God asked Ezekiel to imagine a world with one nation of Israel, brought back from all the nations where they had been scattered. God promised three things for Israel that totally defied their history. He promised them reunion. A people that had ripped itself apart would come together again. He promised them recovery. A nation scattered and destroyed would be found and renewed. He promised them a return to their homeland.

If you know your Old Testament history, you know that Judah did come home from Babylon seventy years after Ezekiel wrote these words. But this prophecy is not talking about that return because the northern tribes were not included. God never brought those northern tribes home. They mingled among the other nations and assimilated into those peoples. They disappeared forever. This prophecy is about a greater reality than just the political fortunes of one small ethnic group. As God so often does with prophecy, he used images that were familiar to Israel to lift their eyes to a higher reality: the reality of faith. The Bible says that the true, spiritual Israel is the New Testament Church. The people whom God will gather from all nations and unite, the people whom God will bring home from exile is not an ethnic group. It's everyone who believes in Jesus.

God promises you and me that we will come home from exile. What exile is he talking about? He's talking about life here. This life that we lead right now is our exile. Does it feel that way to you? I doubt it. After all, we have families that we love. We have homes that we've worked long and hard to purchase and make comfortable. We have careers and interests that we've put enormous amounts of energy into. We have a church where we worship. This is the life we choose to live. How can I call it an exile? It's an exile because this is not our true home. Our true home is with the Lord. All the years of life that we spend here are temporary. They're a journey, not a destination. Our destination is eternal life.

Now, God loves us and he blesses us every day of our lives. But you can't live here without history taking its toll. The history of our nation touches every one of us. A great deal of what we think and feel reflects the fact that we're Americans who live in 2008. If we lived somewhere else or "some when" else we would have different ideas. Sad to say, too often American culture leads us away from God. We all have a personal history that complicates our lives. We all wish we had done certain things differently. Every one of us has sins that haunt us, sins that we wish we could forget, sins that we wish that we'd never committed. Many of us are still suffering the consequences of those sins. Even if it wasn't sin, there may well have been events in our history that hurt us, events we wish we could be free of. All that pain and sorrow and guilt – all of that is our exile.

We have to suffer that exile because sin corrupts everything in this world. And our enemy the devil enjoys inflicting pain on us. So we will experience hardship and loneliness here. We will long for our eternal home. Ezekiel's promise to us today is that we are going home. That's what Christ won for us. This Sunday is called Saints Triumphant. It celebrates the victory Jesus gave us over this life. God promises that he will gather all of us exiles from this life, where we're scattered and separated and alone and to bring us home to him.

And when he brings us home, we will one in heart and mind. In this life, we have to separate from false teaching even among people we believe are Christians. But when Jesus returns, there won't be Lutherans and Catholics and Baptists anymore. There won't be any arguments about doctrine and practice anymore because there won't be any false teachers anymore. God will be our God. And we will be his people. We will all finally understand perfectly all that he has said to us – so there won't be any reason for us to be divided anymore. We will leave behind all false doctrine and every practice which damages our fellowship, and we will live in unity under Christ.

All that is ours because Jesus has taken our sin away. Jesus went to the cross to pay for those sins that still haunt and damage our lives. Jesus went to the cross to set us free from our guilt. Already in this life, we have peace that no unbeliever can understand. But here, that peace is disturbed by the sin that still lives inside us. That sin keeps us from trusting perfectly in what Jesus did and having perfect peace. Here, we still have to face the attacks of the devil and the consequences of other people's sins. In my last congregation, I used to visit

several men in state prisons. Many times, I saw small children waiting to see their fathers. It broke my heart that those kids were paying for their fathers' sins. That happens to all of us. Not sitting in a prison waiting room, but all of us suffer because other people sin. But when Jesus comes back, he will erase all the sin from this world. He will heal every one of our hurts. He will heal our hearts and we will live with him in joy forever.

II.

What God promises us should be impossible given our personal histories. God promises a new life and a new order of things. During this last, endless election, we heard so much about change. We heard so many promises that the new president would make things better. Now that the election is decided, we're going to see if the new direction is better. We'll see if the hangover from what went before can be overcome. But whatever happens in our politics, we have a greater ruler than any human president. **God is greater than our history. He will send us the great King.**

God told Israel that once they were gathered, they would have one king: David. King David was the greatest of all the kings of Israel. But he ruled more than four hundred years before Ezekiel said this. He was long dead. So what was God promising? A millennium when he would rule again? A reincarnation? No. The New Testament is clear. These promises refer to Jesus. And Ezekiel's people understood that because when David was alive, God had promised that a king would come from his descendants who would rule over them forever. Calling Jesus "David" here was a poetic way of reminding them of that ancient promise.

God had not forgotten his people. When their hearts were broken, he told them to look forward to a better time. Not a time on this earth, but a time when the true David, the Messiah, would rule over them. He was pointing them to the time after Jesus comes back. And he said, **"I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever."**

The Hebrew word for peace means something a little different from the English word. The English word implies quietness and an end to anxiety. The Hebrew word implies wholeness. Nothing is tearing you down anymore. Nothing is wrong with you physically or mentally or spiritually. Everything is in order the way that God designed it to be when he made us. That's the life to come. We will be free from sin and hurt. We will be whole and full of joy in the Lord.

And God will put his sanctuary among us. The Jewish sanctuary – the temple – was built with an inner room, called the Most Holy Place. God taught his people that he was inside that Most Holy Place. Having that sanctuary among them was the sign that God had chosen them to be his people. In the life to come, we will have God's sanctuary among us. Now, whether it will be a building again, I don't know. But Jesus will be with us. That is the greatest blessing of the life to come. Even greater than an end to sorrow and pain, even greater than an end to sin, is the end to our separation from God.

When God created Adam and Eve they were holy. They were one with him in heart. He was their God and they were his people. When they sinned, everything changed. They hid from God. They lied and made excuses and rebelled. Sin separates us sinners from God. When Jesus returns, all that they did will be undone. And we will live with God in harmony forever. Ezekiel reminds us that even the nations – those unbelievers who surround the people of God in every generation – will acknowledge that God is with us. They will have to recognize the great King. For them, there will be no joy in that. It will be a part of their punishment. But for us, being with the King will be our greatest joy. We will have it forever.

That is the promise of the gospel. Today, on the Sunday we call Saints Triumphant, you'll notice that I didn't say one word about "going to heaven." Of course, when we die, that's what happens. But today is about more than that. If you study the Bible carefully, you'll find that the Bible does not mention going to heaven very often. It does say it. But only occasionally. The Bible emphasizes the resurrection. The Bible emphasizes living with Jesus forever. Because our victory is over more than just the sin in our soul. Jesus conquered all the devil's work. All creation will be purified. And we will rise and live as God always intended us to live – with him forever. Amen.