

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)

How Can We Have Hope?

You know, I’ve almost given up watching the news. It’s just so depressing. One shooting after another. A deeply divided country with two bankrupt parties and almost no politicians left that I respect. Social values that defy God’s Word shoved down our throats and anyone who stands up for the truth gets attacked. The list just goes on and on. Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever ask yourself what happened to the country we grew up in? But it’s just what’s going on out there. Many of us wrestle with these issues in our own families. Then there are the issues in the church. I see wrangling over translation issues and worship wars. I see men and women who have dedicated their lives to serving their Lord getting into stupid arguments. I see the truth of Jesus’ words that in the last days, the love of most will grow cold. We just celebrated the 500th anniversary of the start of the Lutheran Reformation and it’s hard to imagine Lutheran teaching changing the world today the way it did when Luther lived. Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever wonder we’re we headed and how bad it’s going to get? My friends, when we look around us and see all that is going on in our country, in the world and in the Christian church on earth, **how can we have hope?**

God’s Word for today tells us. This morning, we’re looking at a section from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. He certainly knew about bad times. He understood disappointment at what your country has become. Roughly 350 years before Ezekiel lived, his country, Israel, split into two parts: the northern kingdom, which we usually call Israel and which Ezekiel calls Ephraim today and the southern kingdom, which we usually call Judah. One hundred years before this that northern kingdom was destroyed. The Assyrians conquered them and deported the population to other parts of their empire. Then they brought in non-Jewish people. By the time Ezekiel wrote these words, those northern tribes had disappeared from history. Things weren’t much better in the south. Eleven years before Ezekiel wrote these words, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had come and laid siege to Jerusalem. He led the king away in chains and deported hundreds of prominent citizens – including Ezekiel himself. Most of them would never see their homes again. And just before he wrote these words, a messenger came telling the exiles that Jerusalem had been destroyed. Nebuchadnezzar had burned the city and the temple to the ground. He dragged all but the poorest people of the land into exile. Judah was dead. And there was no reasonable hope that it could ever revive.

Who had it worse, Ezekiel or us? Ezekiel, right? But God came to him with the words we have before us today to comfort him and his people and to give them hope. God told Ezekiel to do something symbolic. This was a big part of his ministry. Ezekiel was always doing something that caught the people's attention. This time, God told him to take two sticks and write the names of the two kingdoms, one on each stick. Then he told him to hold them in his hand so that they made one stick. I think that probably means that he put the ends of them together in his hands so that his hand covered the break and they stuck out on either side like they were one, long stick.

What did that mean? God said, **“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. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. 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.”** God was going to bring these scattered, people home. God was going to make them one nation again with their own king. God was going to cure them of the cause of their destruction: their idol worship and their sinful backsliding. He was going to cleanse their hearts and make them his people again.

What a promise! What a reason to have hope! But you know what? It never came true. Parts of it did. Seventy years after this, God let the exiles in Babylon go home. But all those exiles from the northern kingdom never came back. And the truth is, many exiles in Babylon stayed there. Centuries later, there was still a large Jewish community there in Babylon, descended from people that went into exile during Ezekiel's life. For centuries, thousands of Jewish people lived scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. And they didn't have their own king in Israel. The Jewish people were ruled by the Persians and then various Greek kingdoms. They had a brief period of independence under the Maccabees. But then the Romans conquered them.

So did God's promise fail? No. Because this was never a promise about the physical nation of Israel. You can see that in the last part of the prophecy. God said, **“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.”** And again, **“They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant.”**

King David died almost four hundred years before Ezekiel wrote these words. Was God really promising that he was going to come back from heaven and rule on earth forever? Was God promising some kind of reincarnation? No. The people knew that. But God had promised King David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne and rule forever. God was repeating that promise here. That descendant, of course, was Jesus. In just a few weeks, we're going to hear the angel Gabriel tell Mary that she would have a Son who would sit on the throne of his father David and reign over the house of Jacob forever. This was a promise of the coming Messiah.

So it was promise of God gathering his true people from all over the earth where he's scattered them – where he has scattered us. Because the true people of God, the true Israel, is not an ethnic nation or a physical nation. You don't get in because of where you were born or what your bloodline is. To be a citizen of heaven requires one thing only: faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior. Everyone who has that faith is part of that kingdom. Jesus is collecting hearts from every nation under heaven.

Ezekiel saw a vision of the New Testament Church. But do we fit what he saw, one people under Christ, united in faith and devoted to our Savior? In this world, not so much. For us confessional Lutherans, that celebration of the Reformation focused on God restoring the gospel to a church that had lost it. But to most people, the Reformation represents a shattering of the church in the west. They want to end arguments over doctrine and practice and to unify the church. So the pope went to Sweden to celebrate the Lutheran Reformation with the state Lutheran church there. The Vatican is redoubling its efforts find a way to unify with Lutherans and Episcopalians and Orthodox Christians, to say nothing of reaching understandings with Jews and Moslems and people in other religions. Is that what Ezekiel saw? Is that the unity God promised?

No. Because the institutional divisions are not what divide God's people and having intercommunion with the Catholic Church won't reunite us. What divides God's people today is sin. Sinful human beings do exactly what they did in Ezekiel's day: the refuse to listen to God's Word. They substitute their own ideas for what God has said. And then they demand that God accept it. That's not what Ezekiel saw. He saw God

curing his people of their false gods and their sinful backsliding. He saw God making his people faithful to him and his word forever. That's only going to happen perfectly in heaven. God will bring together all true believers, no matter what church we belonged to here, and we will live with him forever. But here, that isn't ever going to happen, any more than all the physical descendants of Abraham were ever really going to go back to Palestine and live under a resurrected King David. Only in heaven does the church truly gather as one. Only after the resurrection will all believers of every time and place live in a perfect world under their true king, not David, but David's greater Son, Jesus.

But heaven is coming. The resurrection is coming. That is the key to having hope in a broken and sinful world. Right at the end of the reading, God said, **"I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever."** God said that his true Israel would increase their numbers. That's God reaching out to us. The New Testament Church has grown by hundreds of millions of people since Jesus ascended into heaven. God will make his dwelling among us when Jesus returns. God will wipe all sin out of this world and make it new again. And we will live in his presence and rejoice with him for all eternity.

All that begins already now. The Apostle John said, **"The Word became flesh and he made his dwelling among us."** The Word is Jesus, the Son of God, who was one with the Father when God gave these words to Ezekiel. God the Son lived as human being in this world so that all these promises could come true. He lived in our place – he lived in Israel's place – so that the sin that keeps us all out of God's true people could be taken away. Old Testament Israel was destroyed because they weren't faithful to God. The Reformation had to happen and the visible church was divided and remains divided because sinful people aren't faithful to God. You and I sin every day because we don't listen and because the sinner in our hearts does not want to be faithful to God. We deserve nothing but death and hell.

But Jesus came and lived among us for a while. He was holy and righteous in God's sight. That counts for us. Then Jesus suffered hell itself on the cross and died. He paid for every sinner who didn't listen to God. He paid for every believer who was not one hundred percent committed to God's Word. He paid for you and for me, for all the sins in our hearts and in our lives. He paid for all the times we were no better than Israel in Ezekiel's day. His blood washed all that sin away. Then Jesus rose and we are forgiven. Jesus rose and God doesn't see our sin anymore.

Through that Gospel message, God gathered us from the nations we are scattered to. Livonia is a long way from Jerusalem. But we are now citizens of heaven. We are now part of the true people of God. And when Jesus comes back, we will live with him in that perfect world forever. Until Jesus comes back, he promises to shepherd us. He promises to rule the world for our good. He promises to watch over us and hear our prayers and minister to us in the word and sacraments so that our faith remains. He promises to bring us home.

That is our hope. It's the greatest hope that anyone could ever have. It is God's guarantee of victory, when what we see on TV depresses us and what we experience in our lives discourages us. When I was vicar, a friend of mine called me from the seminary. He asked me to visit his grandfather who dying at the veteran's hospital in the city where I served. Then he told me his grandfather wasn't a believer. He had abandoned my friend's mother when she was a little girl and had lived a sinful life. So I thought to myself, "Thanks, Doug. No pressure there." But I went to see him. By the grace of God he confessed faith in Jesus and was baptized right there in his hospital room. He lived for a month or two after that and then he went home to heaven. The night he died, my friend and his mom called me from the hospital and I went to see them. And I told them that when the pastor came to see him, Doug's grandpa said, "You're just the man I want to see. Tell me that my sins are forgiven. Tell me about Jesus." And Doug and his mom knew that his grandfather had won. God made him part of his kingdom. Today he is with Jesus waiting for that moment when we will all gather around him and live with him for all eternity. This Sunday is called Saints Triumphant. That's us. In Christ, we have won. In Christ we will win. Amen.