

“The Living years”

Sundays after Pentecost

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

September 25, 2011

Ezekiel writes: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

To say it another way: *Every generation blames the one before. And all of their frustrations come beating on your door. I know that I'm a prisoner to all my Father held so dear. I know that I'm a hostage to all his hopes and fears. I just wish I could have told him in the living years.*

Over the centuries our perspective really hasn't changed. We may never have eaten a sour grape or know exactly what it means to have our teeth set on edge, but we get the gist of the proverb: children suffer the consequences of their parents' actions. The people of Israel thought that they are in exile because of the sins of their ancestors. ☒☒

Ezekiel argues that righteous children do not suffer for their parents' wickedness; nor do wicked children benefit from their parent's righteousness. The point of this reading is why the people prefer their proverb, and not God's offer of life.☒☒

Crumpled bits of paper filled with imperfect thought. Stilted conversations I'm afraid that's all we've got. You say you just don't see it, he says it's perfect sense. You just can't get agreement in this present tense. We all talk a different language talking in defense.

It's hard to find fault with the truism that children usually do suffer from their parents' mistakes. Ancient Israel's identity was partially formed from guilt and punishment in its understanding of God's justice, which "visits the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Exodus 34:7). Although we no longer attribute children's suffering to the hand of God, we do recognize the impact of family violence on subsequent generations.

But when God rejects the proverb, the issue is not how it's used, but that it's used at all. Against the fated inevitability of inheriting and suffering from a parent's guilt, God proposes an alternative understanding of the nature of justice by grounding it in his identity as the sovereign creator of life.

It becomes clear that God's greater concern is the preservation of life, not the strict application of justice. If, for example, the righteous grandchild is free to change course once he sees and understands the consequences of his father's wickedness, what about the wicked themselves? Are they doomed to suffer punishment for past wickedness? No, says Ezekiel: even the wicked may turn from their wickedness, change course, and live. Because all life belongs to God, even the lives of the wicked, the future remains open, not only for children of bad men, but also for the bad men themselves.

So we open up a quarrel between the present and the past. We only sacrifice the future it's the bitterness that lasts. So don't yield to the fortunes you sometimes see as fate. It may have a new perspective on a different day. And if you don't give up, and don't give in you may just be O.K.

Somewhat surprisingly, the exiles protest: "The way of the Lord doesn't add up!" What the exiles say about God's way is that they are always beyond human understanding. Certainly in the situation described here, in which God's commitment to human life makes the future possible, there is an unaccountable mystery at work. Who could have known, at the darkest moments of exile, that God preferred life? ☒☒

However, God throws back at them their questioning about the meaning of God's ways and asks them the same thing about their ways. "Is it not your ways that don't measure up?" God asks. By what calculus would human beings prefer a fixed destiny of suffering to the freedom of being able to repent, to change course, and thereby to gain life? Although the exiles don't get to answer that question, we can guess that the argument forces them to acknowledge their own culpability. They want to see themselves as innocent, children suffering for their parents' sin. If that perception gives them the freedom to remain victims of others' actions, it also renders them helpless to move into new patterns of life. ☒☒

Say it loud, say it clear. You can listen as well as you hear. It's too late when we die to admit we don't see eye to eye.

I wasn't there that morning when my Father passed away. I didn't get to tell him all the things I had to say. I think I caught his spirit later that same year. I'm sure I heard his echo in my baby's new born tears. I just wish I could have told him in the living years.

Yet God leaves it up to human beings to choose the way of life over the way of death. Perhaps we can understand the final words, "Turn, then, and live!" as words that echo across the testaments, into Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard, and into our own time. Perhaps we do not express our fatalism in the same way that the exiles do. Ours is more advanced, because more scientific, rooted in what we know about the genetic code and environmental conditioning. But perhaps this scientific explanation of our destiny is no less a threat to our well-being as was Israel's need to place the blame on their ancestors (sour grapes and all). Why would we choose scientific explanations for our frailty and limitations over the indeterminate freedom of God's grace? Perhaps God is asking us the same question that he asked Israel: "Why don't we turn, and live?"

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