

## THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day and Ezekiel 33:1-20

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Today, as you can see on the front of your bulletins, is the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany. Last year, because Easter came so early, we did not celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany; but this year, because Easter comes very late, we shall have the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> Sundays after Epiphany before get to Septuagesima. We have a long season between Epiphany and Easter, and today seems to be the day of long Bible lessons. In a little bit, you'll hear an even longer one.

As we go from Christmas through the Epiphany season, the Bible lessons we hear teach us about the attributes of Jesus, about Who He is, and what he is like. These attributes are made known to us in Epiphanies. An Epiphany in the strict sense that we use it here is an appearance, a showing forth, or a manifestation of something. In the Gospel lesson for Christmas, St. John tells us that He is the Word of God, Who **is** God, Who became flesh and dwelt among us, John 1:14 **4 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.** The birth of Jesus is an Epiphany in this sense because it is an appearance of God as a human. Please note. Jesus did not just *appear* to be human; He **was**, and **still is**, fully a man.

If you will look in your Prayer Books on page 98, you will see that there is a second set of Propers, of a Collect, Epistle, and Gospel for use on Christmas Day if the church has more than one service of Holy Communion, on that day. The Gospel lesson in that set of Propers is St. Luke's familiar telling of the Christmas story of Joseph and Mary's trip to Bethlehem for the census, of Jesus birth in the stable and of the angels announcing of His birth to the shepherds. In that we learn that Jesus was born in very humble circumstances as a seemingly ordinary human baby. However, there is one fact that we must never forget, a fact that St. John taught us in that primary Gospel for Christmas: that in that ordinary human body there is a mystical union with the fullness of God. **Jesus is a man, and Jesus is God.**

In the Lessons for the days after Christmas, we learn of many of the events, duties and problems that came with Jesus' humanity. Eight days after He was born, He was circumcised and given his name, as were all Jewish, male children. Thirty-three days after that, He was presented at the Temple as were all first-born, Jewish, male children. Each of these is a manifestation of His faithfulness to the Law of Moses.

Sometime after that, He was visited by Wise Men from the East in the event that we celebrate as the Epiphany, the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles. Then we learned that not long after that, on the Commemoration of the Holy Innocents that He and His family had to flee to Egypt because Herod would try to kill Him. After that, we have seen the Epiphanies of various other attributes of our Lord. We see an Epiphany of **Duty** in His submission to His human parents after His staying behind at the Temple when He was 12. We see an Epiphany of **Sympathy**, in his feeling for the people at the Wedding at Cana, as well as a blessing for a

marriage. And in our Gospel lesson for today, we see an Epiphany of **Mercy and Power** in His healing of the leper and the healing of the Centurion's servant at a distance: Mercy that He would deign to touch the leper, or to heal the servant of a Roman Centurion, a Gentile and an oppressor of the Jews. In doing that He showed mercy to the Gentiles. He also showed his Faithfulness to the Law, that Law that God gave to Moses and to the Hebrews at Horeb as we heard Moses remind the Jews in our OT lesson, in telling the leper that he must go show himself to the priest and make the necessary sacrifice. St. Paul reminded us in the Epistle lesson that we must also obey the civil law which is ordained of God.

Today is a day on which we are exhorted to be faithful to the Law, to both the laws of God and the laws of man. Unfortunately, we have lately seen a lot of disobedience to both. We always look for justice to be tempered with mercy, especially when it is we who are the accused. A big question with us is, "How much mercy can we, or should we, expect from God?" The answer it would seem, is, "It depends."; but what it depends on is **faith**.

On Friday, the First Lesson for Morning Prayer was a long one, the first 20 verses of Ezekiel 33. After reading it, I knew I had to preach on it today. Also, after reading it, I decided that passage ought to be called, *The Gospel According to Ezekiel*. After you hear it, I hope you will agree. Here beginneth the first verse of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel: ESV Ezekiel 33:1 **The word of the LORD came to me:** 2 "Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, 3 and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, 4 then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. 5 He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. 6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. 7 "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8 If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. 9 But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. 10 "And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: 'Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?' 11 Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? 12 "And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. 13 Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his

righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. 14 Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, 15 if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 16 None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live. 17 "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. 18 When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. 19 And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by them. 20 Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways."

This is a gospel in the sense that it was God's word given directly to Ezekiel and it was good news that it was possible for the Jews to be redeemed to eternal life as it says in verse 15: 15 if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. The problem was that, as St. Paul keeps telling us, the Law can't save us; that all it can do is show us where we are wrong, as he says in Romans 3:20 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. Another way of saying what St. Paul said is to say that, "The Law cannot save us; all that it can do is tell us that we are guilty in God's eyes, as guilty as sin." Sin is the problem, and all we have to do to obtain everlasting life is to appear before God on Judgment Day as someone who has never sinned, as someone who is as pure as Jesus. It seems that that may be impossible to do, but it is not.

Many of you know who Calvin Coolidge was – the 30<sup>th</sup> President of the United States from 1923-29. Coolidge was renowned for being a man of few words, very few words. To call him taciturn almost borders on understatement. One story about Coolidge has it that a woman sitting next to him at a dinner tried to get him to talk to her by saying to him, "Mr. Coolidge, I made a bet that I could get more than two words out of you." Coolidge's reply was short and meaningful, "You lose." Another story about Coolidge applies to this sermon. When Coolidge returned from church one Sunday, he was asked what was the topic of the minister's sermon. Coolidge, never one to use two or more words when one would do, said after a moment's thought, "Sin." His inquirer then asked, "And what did he say about it?" This time Coolidge's answer took a few more words, "He was against it." I'm against it too.

Almost all sermons are about sin in one way or another. Whenever we speak about Jesus as our Savior or Redeemer, sin is implied because what we are saved or redeemed from is sin and its consequence, which is not to enjoy eternal life with Him. In our Bible study two weeks ago, there was a handout on sin; and in it, there was a short quote that *almost* says everything we need to know about sin: It is from the Westminster Catechism (Chapter 15:4) and says this: "As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation on those who truly repent." Let me restate this in positive terms: Every sin, no matter how small, deserves damnation; but there is no sin so great that it cannot be forgiven for

**those who truly repent.** I said it *almost* says everything we need to know about sin because there is one sin that in Mark 3:28-29 Jesus Himself said cannot be forgiven. The conclusion of the statement from the Westminster Catechism is almost exactly what Jesus said in Mark 3:28. However, Jesus continues in the next two verses, to put one exception to this universal forgiveness, telling us of the one unforgiveable sin. The full passage of the three verses says this: Mark 3:28-30, **28 "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" - 30 for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."**

The Westminster statement ends with, **"for those who truly repent."** We can see how the Westminster statement gets around the problem of the unforgiveable sin if we think about what it is that causes a person to want to repent. Namely, it is the grace of God given to us by the Holy Spirit, grace that is given to us because of faith. The person who has a spirit so unclean as to blaspheme or reject the Holy Spirit cannot be given and will not receive grace because he has already damned himself.

What God says to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 33:12-13 about righteous people is, in simple terms this: Righteousness won't do the righteous any good if they mess up and sin, because everything good that they ever did gets erased. **12 "And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. 13 Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die.**

But then God continues and tells how repentance can save the wicked, that when a person truly repents all his sins are forgotten, even if that person was really wicked for a long time: Ezekiel 33:14-16 **14 Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, 15 if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 16 None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live.** Now, these are the words of God! God is confirming here what he said to Jeremiah in 31, verses 33 and 34 of his book: Jeremiah 31:33-34 **33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. **For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.**"**

One more comment on a verse from this gospel of Ezekiel. In verse 11 God tells Ezekiel, **"Ezekiel 33:11 11 Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? Does part of this sound familiar? If you**

look in Prayer Book on page 7 Whenever you go to service of either Morning or Evening Prayer, there is a prayer of Absolution pronounced by the Priest or Bishop right after the General Confession. It begins with this: **Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he turn from his wickedness and live, ...**” It is obvious that the beginning of this prayer is inspired by this verse from Ezekiel 33, and that is confirmed by Massey Shepherd in his commentary on the Prayer Book.

Jesus said many times that He was the fulfillment of the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The only difference we find between the gospel of Ezekiel and that of Jesus Christ as He spoke it and as it was explained by St. Paul is that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God who had not yet appeared to the prophets of the OT, and that Jesus inaugurated a New Covenant based on faith in Him and His Resurrection, a Covenant for which the sign was no longer Circumcision, but was Baptism, a Covenant that did not require the regular sacrifices of animals for the remission of sins because that taken care of, once and for all, by Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself on the Cross. In yet another Epiphany, this new covenant was inaugurated by Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed when He said to Apostles, **“This is My Blood of the New Covenant which is shed for you and for many for the remissions of sins. Do this as oft as ye shall drink of it, in remembrance of Me.”** Come, join the celebration of this New Covenant. Come, eat and drink, by faith, with thanksgiving.

AMEN!