

Sermon Text – Sunday, April 14, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Luke 24:36b-48; 2nd Reading: I John 3:1-7

Scripture for Message: Acts 3:12-19 “Turn to God”

Keep this in mind when we read about Jesus’ crucifixion – about two thousand years ago, a particular group of Jewish leaders, in company with representatives of the Roman government, orchestrated Jesus’ crucifixion – not the Jewish people as a whole, either then or now. In addition, these actions were an integral part of God’s plan for the salvation of humankind – not the infliction of divine punishment by the Father on the Son.

The setting for our scripture seems to be just after the Pentecost, very early in the formation of the church, probably within months of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Peter’s voice has a tone of condemnation to it, he is not afraid to speak the truth to these people. These crowds were the same people who were content to see Jesus crucifixion. Peter wonders at their amazement, hadn’t they also witnessed the miracles of healing Jesus performed, hadn’t they witnessed Jesus raising the dead, healing those born blind – yet they had Jesus killed. Peter convicts the crowds with his statement, “you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead.”

Peter reminds the crowd that these miracles come from “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob” this is the God they worship who glorified Jesus at his baptism and through Jesus obedience and faithfulness when Jesus recognized that his hour had arrived. Peter reminds the crowds that the miracles of healing are made possible with the faith that is through Jesus. Peter lets them off the hook in a way by telling the crowds, “I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he [sic] had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer.” In Luke’s gospel Jesus tells his disciples, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.” This was God’s plan, but we need to include repentance as our way to accept God’s gift and be forgiven.

Peter addresses a people who rejected Jesus and Jesus’ teachings. Peter considered that rejection a rejection of God as well, so he urges them to “turn to God.” I wonder what that looks like and what that would mean to us. About a week ago, when I was contemplating this message to you and asking God for guidance and the words to use – I had a dream about my preaching and in that dream, Ezekiel chapter six was opened for me. Now, I’m not going to read that to you this morning, but I will summarize it and then we can figure out how this relates to Peter’s message.

Ezekiel chapter six opens with these three verses, “The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, set your face against the mountains of Israel; prophesy against them and say: ‘O mountains of Israel hear the word of the Sovereign LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places.’” Ezekiel makes it clear that the time to save the nation has passed but promises that God would spare those who are righteous and turn to the Lord. There will be a remnant who, although carried off into exile, will survive the total destruction possibly to bear witness so that others will know that God is Lord. Ezekiel tells the people of the destruction that will fall on them and that destruction will defile the “sacred sites” they set up for themselves – their high places – making them useless for worship. The Lord will destroy their idols, and the people will “loathe themselves for the evil they have done and their detestable practices.” This chapter in Ezekiel ends with “Then they will know that I am the LORD.”

When reading that part of scripture, and the commentary in my study bible, I acknowledge an ultimatum that the Lord gave the people of Israel through Ezekiel’s prophecy. Remember the Lord and find hope or remain on your present course and face utter destruction. I wonder if that is the same message underlying Peter’s address to the people. He tells them, you rejected the Holy and Righteous One, you killed the Author of life. They could stay in this current state influenced by ignorance and the evil of their sinful world, or they could – repent and turn to God.

For the Israel that Ezekiel directed his message to, their rejection became manifest in their inclusion of shrines to other gods – Baal and Baal’s consort Asherah. For the Israelites that Peter addressed their rejection became manifest in the crucifixion of Jesus – whom God raised from the dead. Even though the wrath of God brings destruction, God, because of immense love for humankind, provides a remedy for the faithful. God, a jealous god, does not take rejection well, there are consequences. There are consequences to worshiping other gods. In Old Testament times, the people set up high places – meaning altars – to their various idols. There are consequences to worshiping idols. It is our idols and altars to “other gods” that the one true God vows to smash and ruin.

In New Testament times, the people turned away from God and toward the powers of the Roman Empire or those who would “fight” against the empire. Their idols were power, victory in battle, and in many cases their own pleasure. When Peter asks his question, “why do you wonder” he challenges the people to remember the power of their God and to realize that only God holds the power to heal and to give the one disabled from birth perfect health in their presence.

When human beings exercise their power in self-serving ways and look to ‘lord it over’ others, that sets the stage for divine disruption. We see that in Ezekiel’s message and we see that in God’s act of raising Jesus Christ from the dead. This is God’s work, therefore repent and turn to God.

This isn’t a message for us to turn back to the ancient ways of acknowledging God. So, how does our current culture turn to and acknowledge God? The message from Ezekiel is not a message for us to reject all other religious practices and make the true worship of God legally enforceable as a national religion. In Old Testament times, the Sinai covenant was with the nation of Israel, they were God’s chosen people and God was their God – they were subject to the blessings and curses of that covenant. Nation states and governments are not in covenant with God, it could be a dangerous mistake to believe that God has made our government subject to the same covenantal relationship as Israel with its blessings and curses. We are however, as the church universal and as individuals who believe in Christ, the covenanted people of God. The new covenant, established in Christ’s blood, is with the whole people of God, and not any specific nation or government.

Because we are a people in covenantal relationship with the one true God – the way we worship is important. We cannot reject the message of the cross. God is at work even though the world turns its back on the message of Jesus, the message of love, grace, and forgiveness. The dominant culture thinks only of self, of demonizing the other – we don’t love our neighbors, we don’t even love ourselves. But God overcomes the world’s “no” with the “yes” of the resurrection. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead enables us to turn toward God and away from a sin-filled world.

Repent and turn to God because God is the author and creator of all things. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is victory over death, and that victory is ours when we turn to God. God will destroy our high places, the altars that we raise for idolatrous worship. Those things other than God that drive our living. What are those things – power, success, and pleasure? The very things that are symbolized in the ancient idols of Baal and Asherah. You could call them the idols of “Sex, guns, and rock ‘n roll” – although none of these things we consider inherently bad in our culture, when they become the focus of our lives . . . Well, you know what happens – utter destruction. Lives are ruined and people suffer.

Look church, it matters what we believe about God, it matters what we say about God – there are consequences to getting it wrong. Some people will tell you, what you believe is fine as long as your beliefs are sincere – I wonder if that is true. Scriptures warn us about false prophets – false teaching can have eternal

consequences. I wonder if the way to truly know God is to honestly and faithfully turn toward God so that your sins may be wiped out.

In our culture things have gotten so noisy and chaotic that many of us listen to what the world wants us to hear and have stopped trying to listen to God. But, here's the thing, when you fail to **listen** to God speaking you increasingly become unable to **hear** God speaking. We take the easy way out, we are too easily pleased with an inactive faith. Faith is meant to be challenging and to grow, a static faith becomes an idol to us that sits on a shelf for us to worship and in turn does nothing for us. We become unwilling to do the hard work of following the one true God. We don't want to repent, in fact many of us think in all sincerity that we have nothing of which to repent.

Church – we are witnesses to the fulfillment of God's promises past and can trust God's plan for the future. Because of what we know to be true, we must set our minds on Christ and turn to God. We could stay on our present course in ignorance and dismissing God's message or we can “repent and turn to God.” We, who follow Jesus, know what it means to love our neighbor and we should understand the consequences of not.

In closing, I want to share with you some information from our recent Wednesday Morning Bible Study that occurred during Lent. Those weekly videos focused on the Good News and included scripture from Romans. Our last lesson reminded us of the freedom we have as Christians, we were reminded of freedom through our salvation. We were asked to reflect a little on the impact knowing yourself to be a part of God's family had on the way we view our identity. I wonder if it means that we are better than sin and free to choose righteousness. I wonder too if it means that we must accept that freedom and live like we know we are children of God. I wonder if it means we don't have to put our efforts toward being good enough for God – I wonder if our efforts toward being good enough and measuring up are those high places that God warns will be ruined. Maybe the desire to be “good enough” is the idolatry we are warned about.