

"God Gets the Credit"

Text: Ezekiel 36:22-28

5/13/2018

I texted my Aunt Cathie yesterday, who lives up in Ft. Wayne, and told her that she was featured in my Ascension Day sermon last Thursday; she even gave me the title: "Jesus Is On the Throne." She texted me back to thank me for telling her that, and then she avoided taking any credit by giving all the credit to God, even quoting me a Bible verse. I texted her back a quote from Luther's Small Catechism: "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him ... ," agreeing with her that, whatever good comes from any of us, comes from God. He gets the credit.

That is what I'd like us to look at together this seventh and final Sunday in the season of Easter. I'd like us to consider how true it is that, whatever good we have in our lives, God gets the credit for it. We see that in today's O.T. Lesson, to which we now turn our attention ...

As we do, we return to our O.T. Lesson for today, where we hear again the LORD (Whom God's people 'of old' knew as Yahweh) say:

"It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of My holy Name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will vindicate the holiness of My great Name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. The nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate My holiness before their eyes." (Ezekiel 36:22b-23)

Those words were written by the prophet Ezekiel, who at the time was exiled from the land of Israel in Babylon. Ezekiel had been carted off into captivity around the year 598, and at the time he wrote the words of today's O.T. Lesson the city of Jerusalem had fallen (around 586), and what was left of God's people 'of old' had been carted off to join him in the Babylonian Exile. It's interesting that, even though God's people had entered into possibly the darkest period of their existence with the fall of their city, Ezekiel's book at this point sounds forth an upbeat, positive tone.

That is so because, with the fall of His people, the LORD was already looking forward to saving them and restoring them as His own. He goes on to say in today's O.T. Lesson:

"I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols, I will cleanse you ... you shall be My people, and I will be your God." (vs.24-25, 28)

As we look further at that, and what it means for us today, we notice a few things that stand out: 1) the LORD's motivation for saving His people was Himself and His own reputation 2) the LORD was jealous for His people 3) The peoples' salvation was all the LORD's doing - i.e., He got the credit.

With regard to the first: the LORD's motivation for saving His people, we notice in the very first verse of today's O.T. Lesson that the LORD says:

"It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of My holy Name ... "

Ezekiel says very clearly there that God did NOT save His people because of any sort of merit on their part, or because they deserved it; He didn't save them because they were especially loveable and therefore savable. He saved them because that's Who He was -HE WAS SAVIOR. The God of Israel was kind and good, merciful and gracious; He was forgiving. And it was out of that forgiveness that He saved His people.

Truth be told, having Israel in exile was hurting God's reputation, because it looked to the other nations like He had abandoned them. Just a couple of verses before our O.T. Lesson, the LORD says:

"When they came to the nations where they went, they profaned My holy Name, because it was said of them: 'These are the people of Yahweh, yet they have come out of His land.' "(v.20)

Now here it's important to realize that when the LORD refers to His Name there, He's referring explicitly to the Name "Yahweh," the Name I said earlier was the Name by which He was known. That's important because, when the enemy nations said: "These are the people of Yahweh," it wouldn't have meant anything had they said this instead:

"These are the people of the Lord," because they all had lords and gods that they worshiped, false though they were.

Think of it this way ... For other nations to refer to the God of Israel as "Lord" would be no different than you or I today referring to the god of Islam as "Lord" or "God"; it wouldn't differentiate it in any way from the only true God. To make that differentiation and be clear on which god we mean, we need to call the god of Islam "Allah," and our God (the only true God) "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," Who became flesh in "Jesus Christ." The Name of one's god makes it clear who that god is, and in the O.T. the Name of Israel's God was "Yahweh." So again, the enemy nations of Israel taunted them by saying:

"These are the people of Yahweh; yet they have come out of His land."

When the enemy nations of Israel saw them in exile, they thought her God had abandoned her, that He had written her off in judgment. But the God of Israel did NOT WANT to be a God of judgment. He wanted to be a God of mercy, and love. As He had said to Moses, centuries before:

"(I AM compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and faithfulness."(Exodus 34:6)

In the LORD's loving kindness and faithfulness He would save His people from their sins, eventually restoring them to their homeland to again worship in His presence. In doing that He would vindicate Himself before the nations, as today's text says:

"The nations will know that I am Yahweh, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate My holiness before their eyes."(v.23b)

The reputation of the God of Israel was at stake. To preserve His reputation as a loving, faithful God, He saved Israel - NOT because of who she was, but because of Who HE was. The God of Israel: Yahweh, got the credit.

Which brings us to our second point: the LORD's jealousy for His people. We note that in v.25 of today's O.T. Lesson the LORD says to His people, again:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your IDOLS I will cleanse you."

Those words speak to the reason Israel was in exile: she had been unfaithful to her God - like a wife that runs-around on her husband, Israel had run-around on the LORD by worshiping the idols that were the false gods of her neighbors. As we can imagine, the LORD didn't take too kindly to that. He was jealous for Israel, not wanting to share her love with any other. And here again the book of Exodus comes to mind:

" .. I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, ... "(20:5)

Those words were spoken in conjunction with the First Commandment, and they make the point that God had the right to be jealous for His people. After all, they were His; He and He alone had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, and so He had every right to expect that they would worship Him alone. When they didn't, He became angry, and they were carted off into exile.

BUT again, as we said earlier, God does NOT WANT to be angry; He wants to be merciful and loving. After all, the passage in Exodus we just heard from goes on to say that He shows:

" ... steadfast love to thousands of those who love (Him) and keep (His) commandments."(Ex. 20:6)

In keeping with that, the LORD promised through Ezekiel to cleanse His people from their sins, and bring them back to their own land to again worship in His presence. That which happened some 50 to 100 years later, when Israel was saved from exile.

And that brings us to our last point, that of the peoples' salvation being all the LORD's doing. We see that in today's text when we count up how many times the pronoun "I" is used: 12 times. 12 times in a matter of 7 verses the LORD speaks of salvation as if it was exclusively His doing. And that's because it was! As we said earlier, Israel didn't do a thing to in any way deserve or contribute to her salvation. My goodness, at the time these words were written, Israel couldn't do anything; she was in exile! Her salvation HAD TO BE the LORD 's doing.

And our salvation is the Lord's doing as well. As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."(5:8)

While we were yet dead in our sinful following after false gods of our own making, God sent His Son to lead us out of our own exile to sin and death. The Lord says today through Ezekiel, again:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols."

In the "clean water" of Holy Baptism the blood of the ultimate sacrifice - the sacrifice of the Son of Israel's God: the Lord Jesus Christ - was sprinkled on us. By that "sprinkling" God cleanses us of all our sin. Baptized into God's Name - NOT the Name of "Yahweh," but the Name of "the Father and of the ~~✠~~ Son and of the Holy Spirit," the Name revealed by Jesus, we are made God's people today.

It's God's doing, folks. He gave His Son for us, without our giving anything to Him in return, and He gives His Son to us still - in His Word & Sacrament, even feeding us with His very Body & Blood. And here's the thing: since you didn't do anything to earn or deserve being God's people, you can't do anything to not deserve it. To be sure, you can throw it away, in unbelief, but you can't do anything to lose it. I'll say it again repeat __ here ... It's all a part of God getting the credit.

Which would be a good place to end. I mentioned at the beginning a quote from the Small Catechism, where Luther says that "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him " That quote goes on to say that" ... the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the true faith." The Spirit of Jesus, working through His Word, keeps us faithful folks. As Jesus says in today's Gospel:

"I have said these things to you to keep you from falling away."(John 16: 1)

Or in the words of today's O.T. Lesson:

"I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, ... " (v.27)

The Spirit of God/ the Spirit of Jesus - poured out on Pentecost (next week) and given to us in Holy Baptism - causes us to live according to God's Word. That's why we go to church & Bible Study to be fed on God's Word and so be empowered to live the way God wants us to. If there's anything good in us, anything to distinguish us from the evil that so characterizes the world in which we live, it's God's doing. May we live by God's Word always. Oh, and when we do, God gets the credit -

- in Jesus' ✝ Name,

Amen!