

September 24, 2017

Lesson 4: Spirit-Filled Heart

Scripture: Ezekiel 36-47 and Titus 3:1-11

Context:

The last signs of God's covenant we examine is that of a "spirit-filled heart." The focus of the lesson comes from the book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament. Ezekiel was a prophet in the sixth century when Judah was a pawn in the great struggle between the Assyrians and others for the Syro-Palestinian corridor.¹ Assyria, Egypt, and Babylonia were all seeking to take over the region and to make it their own for trading purposes.

As the powers battled back and forth, the Israelite kings were placed in difficult positions. Some attempted reform such as Josiah, while others like Jehoiakim functioned as puppets. After the fall of the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonians came to control.² One of the first functions of the Babylonians was to exile all the nobles, influential national leaders, and religious figures like Ezekiel so that the country would not rebel. The future looked bleak for the Israelites, as evidenced by the lamentations and predictions of prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

Thus, Ezekiel had the task of preaching hope to the people, but also holding their feet to the fire. While at times the predicament and condemnation seems bleak, Ezekiel always turns back to the fact that God has made a covenant to be with them and will not give up on them. Even though bad things have happened, some of their own doing, God is with them through it all.

The sections beginning in chapter 33 of Ezekiel focus on the restoration of Israel and the eventual redemption they will experience. Just as God made a covenant with Abraham, God continues with that covenant with Abraham's descendants. In the case of Ezekiel's day though, God will also renew the Israelites even though they have failed and disobeyed God.

They are promised a new heart and a new spirit. Stony hearts will be replaced with living hearts, ones that beat and have a pulse. Their hearts will be filled with the Holy Spirit so that they will be God's people and live with the laws and regulations that govern them. The whole process will bring abundance to the people and they will flourish. God has promised to restore and redeem them.

Application:

Today's passage is a great teacher of the Holy Spirit and how God works to create something beautiful out of us. As I read this passage, I couldn't help but smile and remember a hymn that we sung often at Hope Hull UMC. The hymn *Here I Am, Lord* had a second verse that always captivated me: "I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone. I will speak my word to them. They turn away. Whom

¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Ezekiel," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1990), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

shall I send? Here, I am Lord.”³ The song was often a hymn of invitation sung at the close of worship as we either went on mission trips or just a regular week where we returned back to the work world.

But each time the song was sung, I remember the power of the words: “Whom shall I send? Here I am, Lord.” It was a reminder that God was at work in our lives in the here and now. God would use us to do God’s will. God would be the ones to move through us so that we could be the people we were called to be. All we had to do was say “Here I am, Lord.”

One of the things that I have grown to especially love about being a United Methodist is the understanding of grace. We believe in sanctifying grace, that God is constantly at work in our lives to make us holy and help us to be advocates of mercy and justice. It is a process where God helps us to see things more clearly and to understand that even though we are sinners, God’s grace meets us on the journey. As we grow and mature in our faith, God continues to help us see new possibilities and directions for our lives.

As we think about this passage from Ezekiel, we are given hope that just as God restored the Israelites, God will restore us. Each day, week, month, and year offer new opportunities to grow in our faith. God has promised to renew us and to help mold us to be the people we are called to be. The powers of sin and death have no hold over us as we follow Jesus who has given us the words and the actions we need to orient our lives to follow the Great Commission.

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³ Dan Schutte, “Here I Am, Lord,” in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1981).