

October 1, 2023 – Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 & Philippians 2:1-18

“It's not fair! We didn't do anything wrong. It was all their fault. They got us into this mess. They're the reason why we're suffering. We shouldn't be punished for their mistakes. It's not fair!”

Does this sound familiar? Maybe you heard one of your children saying it about something their little brother or sister did. Maybe you heard it from a politician during an interview, blaming the other party for all the ills of our country. Maybe you heard it from a friend or family member, endlessly complaining about their job. Or maybe, just maybe, you've said those words to yourself once or twice. “It's just not fair.”

In our Old Testament lesson for today, it's ancient Israel saying it. But they're not saying it from inside Israel or Judah. They're saying it from inside Babylon, during the Babylonian captivity.

You see, for roughly a decade now, the Israelites have been captives in Babylon. Forcibly taken there by King Nebuchadnezzar to ensure that they would never again be able to rebel against his rule. They would be subjects of the Babylonian Empire whether they liked it or not.

They did not like it. But they had no choice. And right away after they went into exile they realized that they had brought this on themselves. For they had brought the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah with them. Prophesying that this exile was exactly what would happen if they did not turn from their idolatry and corrupt leadership.

And now they had the prophet Ezekiel among them in the midst of their exile. Essentially telling them on a daily basis, “God told you so.” You were warned. You did not heed the warning. And therefore, you are suffering the consequences. This is what happens when you do not fear the Lord.

And, at first, they take this message to heart. They admit that they messed up. They admit that they sinned. And they turn back to the Lord in sorrow for that sin.

But as time goes on, a new attitude crops up within them. As the oldest leaders of Judah begin to die off and a new generation grows up in Babylon to take their place, they begin to ask themselves, “What did we do to deserve this?”

We were children when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. We didn't take part in any of this idolatry and corruption that you keep talking about. And yet, here we are, little better than slaves of a foreign kingdom, suffering for what our fathers did. For their sin.

It's not fair! We didn't do anything wrong. It was all their fault. They got us into this mess. They're the reason why we're suffering. We shouldn't be punished for their mistakes. It's not fair!

They even begin to repeat a proverb among themselves to describe the situation: “*The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.*” To say that someone's teeth are set on edge is to say that they're grimacing. Cringing at something unpleasant.

Their fathers ate sour grapes. Their fathers did something utterly foolish that they knew would leave a terrible taste in their mouths. But their fathers didn't end up having to taste those sour grapes. No, their children were forced to taste them instead. Taste them for 70 years of exile from their homeland. “It's just not fair.”

I think we can sympathize with them. Because, as I said, we've all said that to ourselves at one time or another. But here's the thing we have to remember and the thing that Ezekiel wanted them to remember. By saying that the situation was unfair, they were also saying that God was unfair.

“*Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.'*” Whether they realized it or not, they were calling God unfair. Unfair for punishing them for something their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers had done. Unfair for leaving them in exile when they had done nothing wrong.

And more often than we'd like to admit, we're saying the same thing. Because we are exiles, just like them. We are God's people. God's children. God's church. But we are not with him in paradise. Boonville is definitely not the New Jerusalem.

We are in exile. Trapped in a land where we are strangers and foreigners. Surrounded by pagans who do not know our God and who barely tolerate the existence of our church.

And every day, we suffer in exile. Longing to be somewhere other than this sinful world with all its pain and cruelty. Longing to be home. Longing to be in the Temple of the Lord, worshipping before his throne. Longing to be in paradise once more.

But we're not. And why not? Because thousands of years ago, Adam and Eve sinned? That's not my fault! I didn't do anything wrong. They got us into this mess. They're the reason why we're suffering. We shouldn't be punished for their mistakes. It's not fair!

*"The way of the Lord is not just."* It's so easy to be sucked into that way of thinking. Because at its core is the same sin that Adam and Eve gave into: wanting to be like God, knowing good and evil. Because in order to say, "The Lord is not just," you have to judge God. You have to know better than he does what is just and not just. What is fair and not fair. What is good and evil.

That self-righteousness is a sin that humanity has been struggling with since the Garden of Eden. It was the downfall of our first father and mother. It was the downfall of ancient Israel. And it is our downfall as well.

And God's response to it in our text is pretty straightforward. He says, "No, no, no. I'm completely just. You're the ones who are not just. Because if you really are as righteous and all knowing as you think you are, well then just stop sinning."

It's easy. *"When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it... when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life."* Just be perfect and you'll live and everything will be fine. You'll never suffer again.

Sin and you die. Be perfect and you live. It's not very helpful. But it is just. Perfectly just. And it is fair. Perfectly fair.

Thankfully, that is not God's last word on the issue. Because, as he says at the end of the passage, he does not desire the death of anyone. He wants us to live. He did not send the Israelites into Babylonian captivity so that they would die in exile. Nor does he want us to feel abandoned and left to die in this sinful world.

What he says is that real problem here is not our desire to be perfect, to do what is "just and right." The real problem here is with our heart and our spirit. A man with a sinful heart and sinful spirit will only do sinful things.

The young men and women of Ezekiel's day thought that because they hadn't participated in the idolatry and corruption of their fathers, they deserved to be freed from exile. That it was unjust to punish them for the things their fathers had done.

But, in reality, they have the same idolatrous, corrupt hearts and spirits that their fathers did. They put on a veneer of self-righteousness, claiming to be better than them. But at their core, they were the same sinful people.

We are the same sinful people. We have hearts that do not love God as we should. We have spirits that do not love our neighbors as ourselves. We deserve worse than exile. *"The soul who sins shall die."* We deserve death.

But what we receive instead is a new heart and a new spirit. Through Holy Baptism, through the working of God's Word, through the Supper we receive here this morning, we have a heart that is transformed and a new Spirit within us.

For one who truly was perfect has died in our place. Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. Though he was truly God, knowing good and evil, he made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant. Though he was in the form of a human being, he did not have the self-righteousness, idolatry, and corruption that plagues humanity. Instead, this perfect man humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Because of him, it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. It is God who works a new heart and a new spirit within you, that you may be children of God in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. Shining as lights in the midst of your own Babylonian exile.

And yes, we still sin. But as Ezekiel repeats again and again, we also repent and turn from those transgressions. And so iniquity is not our ruin. For because Christ died, the soul who sins shall not die. The souls who sins and trusts in him shall live. The soul that lays that sin on Christ so that it dies with him shall also live with him in his resurrection.

The way of the Lord is just. Sin requires death and righteousness gives life. But in God's justice, our sin is paid in the death of Jesus Christ. In his justice, the righteousness of Christ's perfect life is given to us. The way of the Lord is just. And just as God brought his ancient people back from exile, so he will bring us out of our exile in this sinful world, into the paradise of his eternal kingdom. Amen.