



DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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"THAT GOD WILL BE GOD"

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Say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord God: 'it is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name,...'"

We have begun today's service by chanting the Great Litany, an appropriate way to begin Lent. In those ancient cadences, we confess our manifold sins, all the ways that we fall short. "Good Lord, deliver us."

And the Lord *will* deliver us; at least that is the testimony of Scripture. Our God cares, hears, acts. God is a deliverer. Today's scripture from Ezekiel speaks of this divine deliverance: God says, I will take you, I will gather, I will bring you, I will give you...."

The prophet speaks these words to exiles, people who had been cruelly deported from their land. These are words spoken to a people down and out, having hit bottom. "I will be your God. I will deliver you..." This message of hope is not original with Ezekiel. The prophets were unanimous in their assertion that God delivers God's people from despair.

And as a pastor, I'm glad that I have that word to speak, for (as the litany reminds us) there is always enough despair in this life to be grateful that God is deliverer. I am grateful that the prophetic word is -- when you are like Israel in exile, when you are down, utterly without possibility, there is hope -- God will deliver. Every prayer by a believer, every cry for help is based upon that assertion: God delivers.

That hope is not being debated in today's text. There is another issue within today's text. "Thus says the Lord God: 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...Through you I will vindicate the holiness of my great name....It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord God."

It is not for your sake that I will act. The question is not about theodicy, a question about whether or not God will intervene and deliver. The question is *Why?* On what basis?

Well, we answer, God delivers because God cares. God loves us. But Ezekiel does not say that. Nowhere is it said that God's heart goes out to his suffering people. Jeremiah said that, and Isaiah. But Ezekiel says that God has come to such a low opinion of his people -- "you have profaned, are unclean, you idolaters, your deeds are not good" -- that, if there is to be deliverance. *Israel has nothing to contribute to that deliverance.* By its behavior, the nation now waits empty-handed to receive whatever God chooses to give.

"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...I will vindicate the holiness of my great name...and the nations will know that I am the Lord..."

Walter Brueggemann says, "I regard this as one of the most dangerous and stunning texts in the Bible, for it sets God's free, unfettered sovereignty at a distance from Israel." God will act, but God's actions have nothing to do with God having pity, or mercy, or compassion for Israel or us. You can forget that motherly love business in Isaiah or Jeremiah; Ezekiel speaks nothing of it. Oh, I've preached about such a basis for God's intervention: "I have heard the cry of my people and I have come down to deliver them." (Exodus) "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor, deliverance to the captives." (Isaiah, Luke)

A friend told of working at the Penitentiary where, every week, parents would come to visit their imprisoned sons who would every week, refuse to see them. Still they came back. He says, "God's love is even more like that with us."

But what happens, Ezekiel asks, what happens when even God's compassion goes dry? What happens when God has gone the second, third, fifth mile with his people and still they disobey? What then? Ezekiel says that God has had it with Israel. Took them back once, twice, twenty times. But now the mercy, compassion, of God have gone dry. What then?

Then (our text answers) there is holy God, in all of God's unaccommodating, prickly self-concern. God's reputation, God's good name, are important to God, even if they are unimportant to us. The nations have watched God's treatment of Israel. What will God do now that Israel has blown its fifteenth chance to straighten up? What will God do? God's reputation is on the line.

Brueggemann says this text portrays God like people in a restaurant watching parents with small children. The children are tired and they are not behaving well. The parents are also tired and embarrassed. Not much is at stake for the children; they are behaving just like children. But much is at stake for the parents; everybody is watching. They might like to swat the children, to let them have it. But they can't or the people in the restaurant will think that they are bad parents. How are they going to look when word gets around town that they can't cope with their kids? So they become the very models of parental patience. After all, people are looking.

Ezekiel says this same thing happened to God. Israel had thrown one long tantrum. God acted like the long suffering, patient parent until God could take it no longer. All the nations were watching to see what God would do now that Israel had pushed God too far. Here, at the end of the rope, in desperation, there is no more mushy talk about compassion, mercy, the tolerance of God. Now there is nothing left but God. Nothing Israel could repent of, or vow to do, could change things.

What now? Now God will look after God for a change. That may sound hard-nosed. We are obsessed with what God thinks about us. What do we need to do to get right with God, to set things straight? So at church on Sunday morning, we feel as if we ought to get our money back if the preacher expends too much time speaking about what God is doing and too little time telling us what we're supposed to do. That assumes God needs something we can do.

Ezekiel says it's too late for that. Now, the future rests solely upon the hope that God will take seriously being God. "I'm not going to deliver you because of you, but because of me and my holiness. That the nations will see that I am God." (They will watch and know that it takes a very great God to love a people like you.)

Hope, our text suggests, is a by-product of God's free, unfettered goodness. Our only hope, when the chips are down, is that God will be God.

We are unaccustomed to such thinking. There is hope for us, we think, because after all, down deep, we are very nice people, who are doing the best we can. We wish we didn't have to base our civilization upon nuclear weapons. We really don't mean to be self-centered, violent, cruel to one another. Hope lies in our attempts to straighten up and do better -- better education, more brightly lit streets, tighter national security, a new administration in Washington. Christ has no hands but our hands. God just can't get along without good people like us.

The worst sin of all, says Augustine, is "the conceit of merit," the notion that somehow God's love is our entitlement. If we are honest about ourselves, our motives, our reasons, the way we live with one another, the secret, undisclosed desires of our hearts, we feel deep, deep guilt and are driven thereby to deep, deep despair. Today's text speaks to *that* despair -- the despair of knowing that we are not worth saving, that we have cashed in our chips, that we have no markers left to call in. What then?

It is only the most honest of people who are drawn to that brand of despair. One reason that we are forever indebted to Israel is that Israel dared, in its scriptures, to be so utterly self-critical.

This text stands as a rebuke to those in Israel in Ezekiel's day who assumed that their restoration was based upon their merit. There were those who thought that God had to have a temple priesthood, or a royal dynasty, so God would, of course deliver them. We are a Christian, a democratic country; God needs us. I have tithed, gone to church, never knowingly sinned since graduation; God must deliver me. How would God save the Freshman class without me? (God is my patron rather than my sovereign.)

Ezekiel puts forth the stunning assertion that our hope depends on God *not* having such commitments to us. We want to believe that God is dependent upon our goodness -- our ability to get things together, the survival of democratic capitalism, the defeat of racism, the establishment of socialism -- because then we can manage the future. It is in our hands. Conversely, if God is free to be God, God might surprise us.

The later possibility requires of us not goodness, but something much more difficult for us modern people even than goodness. It requires that we *trust*. It requires that we place the significance of our lives, our hope for the future solely in God's hands. Which of these views offers the surer hope? Of course, it all depends on whether or not God can be trusted or whether our hope is in ourselves and our systems.

We are notorious for our attempts to harness God for our schemes. Jesus told a story of two men who went to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14), a story told to those who "trusted in themselves, that they were righteous." (v. 9) The first man, a Pharisee, was a good religious liberal, the very embodiment of self-trust. He was the religiously confident, the psychologically assured, the politically bold. "I am not like the others, extortioners, unjust, adulterers. I fast twice a week. I give a tithe of all I get." God, I thank thee that I am not sexist, racist, materialist....God I thank thee for me.

But oh, how this posturing, pretentious prayer crumbles before today's text: "It is not for your sake...but for the sake of my holy name that I act."

Israel had hit bottom. Languishing in exile, some in Israel began to see that hope is possible, not because God has a preferential option for poor Israel, not because the old man has gotten soft on judgment but because God wants to be true to himself. First we say, "Our Father who art in heaven, *holy* be your name...." then we say, "give us this day,...forgive us our trespasses,...deliver us...." It is because God is holy, not us, that we dare to pray.

Ludwig Feuerbach argued that faith in God is a mere projection of our ideal images of ourselves. God has no real independent existence. When you pray to God, you are merely speaking to your highest ideal of who you wish to God you really were. Feuerbach's charge is difficult to refute today where many would make a virtue out of such projection. God is my father, mother, sister, brother, the justification for my particular ideology of the right or the left. God is on the side of the poor. God is for the Contras. I can't relate to God unless God is my gender, my class, my size. Narcissistic theology based on my inflated ego is the order of the day. Theology is no good unless it does something good for me and my minority. This God can be worshipped and prayed to only because God is like me.

God is drawn into and identified with our social commitments. Worship is a time for the preacher to identify which side God is on so that the congregation can get on with the business of rushing over to that side. Conservatives know that God is against homosexuality, and communism. Liberals know that God is pro-bussing and pro-choice.

It all sounds well and good that we should be about doing what God wants done, but ultimately this leads to despair. We stagger out of church under the burden of thinking that because we know what God wants and are able to do what God wants, we must be gods unto ourselves.

What a reprimanding word is this: Not for your sake, but for the sake of my name. And what a word of hope. All our feverish attempts to be right and do right are put in perspective. We don't have to brag in our prayer because finally, prayer is an act of yielding to holy God rather than justifying ourselves. In this society, paralyzed by its guilt, immobilized by its nuclear fear, beset with survival issues, in exile, hear again the hopeful word that tomorrow is in God's hands, something to be determined in God's own freedom. Our best hope, in life and death, is that God will be God. Which may sound ambiguous, threatening, or may cause us to fall back on a power other than our own, but the Bible teaches that that is the way to true hope.

Let us pray: *From our anxious attempts to know and be and do, good Lord deliver us, not for our sake, but for the sake of thy holy name.*