

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity¹

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Supply Priest²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.⁴

“And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them. For thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, but to the house of Israel; Not to many people of a strange speech and of an hard language, whose words thou canst not understand. Surely, had I sent thee to them, they would have hearkened unto thee. But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted. Behold, I have made thy face strong against their faces, and thy forehead strong against their foreheads. As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead: fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house. Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, all my words that I shall speak unto thee receive in thine heart, and hear with thine ears. And go, get thee to them of the captivity, unto the children of thy people, and speak unto them, and tell them, Thus saith [SETH] the Lord GOD; whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear. Then the spirit took me up, and I heard behind me a voice of a great rushing, saying, Blessed be the glory of the LORD from his place. I heard also the noise of the wings of the living creatures that touched one another, and the noise of the wheels over against them, and a noise of a great rushing. So the spirit lifted me up, and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit; but the hand of the LORD was strong upon me.

“Then I came to them of the captivity at Tel-abib [tell-AY-bibb], that dwelt by the river of Chebar [KEY-barr], and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them

seven days. And it came to pass at the end of seven days, that the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Again, When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul.”

Or,

Here beginneth the thirteenth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel (KJV).⁵

“And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel that prophesy, and say thou unto them that prophesy out of their own hearts, Hear ye the word of the LORD; Thus saith **[SETH]** the Lord GOD; Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! O Israel, thy prophets are like the foxes in the deserts. Ye have not gone up into the gaps, neither made up the hedge for the house of Israel to stand in the battle in the day of the LORD. They have seen vanity and lying divination, saying, The LORD saith **[SETH]**: and the LORD hath not sent them: and they have made others to hope that they would confirm the word. Have ye not seen a vain vision, and have ye not spoken a lying divination, whereas ye say, The LORD saith **[SETH]** it; albeit I have not spoken? Therefore thus saith

[SETH] the Lord GOD; Because ye have spoken vanity, and seen lies, therefore, behold, I am against you, saith [SETH] the Lord GOD. And mine hand shall be upon the prophets that see vanity, and that divine lies: they shall not be in the assembly of my people, neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel; and ye shall know that I am the Lord GOD.

“Because, even because they have seduced my people, saying, Peace; and there was no peace; and one built up a wall, and, lo, others daubed it with untempered mortar: Say unto them which daub it with untempered mortar, that it shall fall: there shall be an overflowing shower; and ye, O great hailstones, shall fall; and a stormy wind shall rend it. Lo, when the wall is fallen, shall it not be said unto you, Where is the daubing wherewith ye have daubed it? Therefore thus saith [SETH] the Lord GOD; I will even rend it with a stormy wind in my fury; and there shall be an overflowing shower in mine anger, and great hailstones in my fury to consume it. So will I break down the wall that ye have daubed with untempered mortar, and bring it down to the ground, so that the foundation thereof shall be discovered, and it shall fall, and ye shall be consumed in the midst thereof: and ye shall know that I am the LORD. Thus will I accomplish my wrath upon the wall, and upon them that have daubed it with untempered mortar, and will say unto you, The wall is no more, neither they that daubed it; To wit, the prophets of Israel which prophesy concerning Jerusalem, and which see visions of peace for her, and there is no peace, saith [SETH] the Lord GOD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the First Epistle General of John.⁶

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall

be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him. Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous. Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment, That we should believe on

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, according to the Revised Three-Year Common Lectionary, Year B (the Fourth Sunday after Easter), 2006.

² Retired Rector, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Chester, PA.

³ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 43 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxix (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxvii (CIPBC 1963).

⁴ Ezekiel 3:4-21 (KJV).

⁵ Ezekiel 13:1-16 (KJV).

⁶ I John 3:1-end (KJV).

All of us are born in sin, and we all live in sin, but we do not need to die in sin. When we acknowledge and confess our sins and lay them on the broken body of Christ, He not only forgives us but He fills us with His own holiness. He gives us the power to live new lives as people under His authority and protection. That means we no longer wander through life with no stars, no global positioning satellites, no fixed landmarks, and no particular destination.

We are bound for glory, and we are guided on the way by the Holy Spirit so we can avoid the spiritual reefs on which many a life has been wrecked. We can resist the sweet songs of the sirens of Satan who call to us so deceptively from the deadly rocks. Our baptism represents passage from darkness to light, from blindness to sight, from rebellion to obedience, from death to life.

And that brings me at last to the way in which anyone can become an heir of life and a child of light. If this were a Baptist church I would issue an altar call right about now. But this is an Anglican church and we don't do that sort of thing. Maybe we should. But I will say this. As a priest I am obliged to hear the confession of anyone who wishes to make one, and I am ready, by the grace of God to instruct anyone in the essentials of the Christian faith. And before I stop, let me at least ask you to bow your heads and let me pray over you.

Almighty God, look with favor on all who put their trust in your Son Jesus, and grant them the assurance that their sins are forgiven, that they have passed from death to life, and that they are loved beyond measure. Help them to know what is true, to live in obedience to your commandments, to resist the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil, and to honor you not only with their words but with their deeds. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

One of the things I love about St. John is that he does not pussyfoot around. He sees things in black and white with no shades of gray. He would make a terrible politician because he cannot compromise and he cannot straddle any fences. Right is right and wrong is wrong. There is truth and there is falsehood. There are children of light and children of darkness. There are those who see and those who are blind. There are those who are born of the flesh and those who are born of the spirit. There are the heirs of life and the heirs of death. There are those who are forgiven and those who remain in their sins. There is no middle ground.

That's not a very popular attitude these days because we live in a time when there are not supposed to be any certainties and everybody's opinion is supposed to be of equal value. There is your truth and there is my truth, but there is no absolute truth. All morality is relative, and it is strictly forbidden to judge anyone else's behavior.

That's a hard way to live. It's like trying to navigate an uncertain sea with no stars, no global positioning satellites, no fixed landmarks, no destination, and nothing to guide you but other ships that are just as lost as you are.

Moslems do not live that way. Jews do not live that way. And Christians do not need to live that way, either. All three of those great monotheistic religions make claims to exclusivity, and all three define the terms of inclusion in different ways.

In the Second Lesson today, St. John defines the terms of inclusion in the true faith rather broadly. He says, "All who keep [God's] commandments abide in him and he in them" And what are those commandments? John specifies two: "that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another." And if those two commandments sound familiar, they are the Johanine version of Our Lord's own summary of the Jewish Law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

That all sounds rather simple, but there is something else that John says and that Jesus says as well. They are both men of action. That's another thing I like about St. John. He doesn't put a lot of faith in what people say. He wants to see what people do. You can't just say that you believe in the name of Jesus; you have to trust your eternal destiny to him. St. Peter says, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we may be saved", and St. John agrees.

And by the same token you can't just say you love somebody. You have to act out your love by sharing your worldly goods and even laying down your life for those you purport to love.

There are other things that are required in order to be part of the Christian Church, which St. John equates with being on the right side of that great divide between children of light and children of darkness, heirs of life and heirs of death, or as Jesus Himself puts it, the sheep and the goats. But what is not required is anything over which you have no control, such as your ethnicity or your sexuality. The eighth chapter of Acts demonstrates that.

There, the Ethiopian official who was on his way home from Jerusalem followed the Jewish religion but he was not of

Semitic origin. Not only was he a Gentile but he was also a eunuch, which means that as a boy he had been deprived of his masculinity and yet was not a woman either. But Phillip the evangelist saw neither of those attributes as barriers to inclusion in the company of the faithful. So when the eunuch accepted the truth of the Gospel and entrusted himself to Christ, he asked to be baptized, and he was.

This little episode shows that the way to salvation is open to anyone and everyone who desires to be part of the body of Christ and wants to live in a way that is pleasing to God and who calls upon the name of Jesus for salvation and life. I'll say more about that in a minute, but first let me tell you some of the blessings enjoyed by those who, through baptism, are admitted to "the blessed company of all faithful people".

In the Second Lesson today, John mentions four things of which Christians can be certain: We know that we have passed out of death into life. We know love. We know that we are of the truth. We know that God abides in us and we in Him.

We know these things not because of what anybody says but rather because of what God has done and what we ourselves are doing. We know love because Christ gave His life for us out of love. We know that God dwells in us because we are moved by that same spirit of love to share what we have with others as Christ shares His glory with us, and we are also moved to sacrifice our lives for others as Christ has sacrificed His for us. We know truth because Jesus, as the Word of God, is in fact the truth. We know that we have passed from death to life because we ourselves exhibit the character of Christ in our dealings with each other.

And there is another thing of which we can be certain. Saint John puts it this way: "If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts." When we put our trust in Christ, we can be sure that our sins are forgiven.