

**Sermon for Morning Prayer:
The Fourth Sunday in Lent**

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest in Charge

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the thirty-ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.²

“... And I will set my glory among the heathen, and all the heathen shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid upon them. So the house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God from that day and forward.

“And the heathen shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity: because they trespassed against me, therefore hid I my face from them, and gave them into the hand of their enemies: so fell they all by the sword. According to their uncleanness and according to their transgressions have I done unto them, and hid my face from them. Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Now will I bring again the captivity of Jacob, and have mercy upon the whole house of Israel, and will be jealous for my holy name; After that they have borne their shame, and all their trespasses whereby they have trespassed against me, when they dwelt safely in their land, and none made them afraid. When I have brought them again from the people, and gathered them out of their enemies' lands, and am sanctified in them in the sight of many nations; Then shall they know that I am the LORD their God, which caused them to be led into captivity among the heathen: but I have gathered them unto their own land, and have left none of them any more there. Neither will I hide my face any more from them: for I have poured out my spirit upon the house of Israel, saith the Lord GOD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the third Chapter of the second Epistle of Blessed Paul the

Apostle to the Corinthians.³

“... Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: And not as Moses, which put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[A]ll the nations shall see my judgment which I have executed, and my hand which I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God, from that day forward.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Religion in America today is a marketplace. Not only are there various religions from among which people are free to choose, but within those religions there are varieties of expression. If you want to be a Jew, for example, you can choose to be Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed, Reconstructionist, Messianic, or simply secular. There are similar choices for Moslems, Buddhists, and other religions, and I don't have to tell you how many varieties of Christians there are. If you don't like any of the choices, you can make up a religion of your own, as

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xviii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Ezekiel 39: 21-29 (KJV).

³ II Corinthians 3: 12-18 (KJV).

⁴ Ezekiel 39: 21b-22 (RSV).

many do, or you can simply decide not to be involved with any of them.

In making the decision about which religion if any to follow, people often decide what role they would like God to play in their lives. Then they look for a god who will play that role.

Often the role they assign to God is that of a protector. They want God to keep them from harm, and if He doesn't do it, they stop believing in Him. That kind of thinking is what Ezekiel dealt with in the Old Testament lesson for today.

At the time Ezekiel wrote, the various gods were believed to rule over particular geographic areas and over the nation and people who lived there. Each god was expected to protect his own turf and the people who worshiped him. When someone moved to a different country, he was expected to pay tribute to the god who held the franchise, as it were, for that country. When a nation conquered another nation, the belief was that the god of the victorious nation had proven to be more powerful than the god of the defeated nation. So it was that when Israel was conquered and her people dispersed, the God of Israel was deemed to have been defeated.

When the Jews were freed from bondage and returned to their own land, that was evidence that God actually had the power to protect his people, so another explanation had to be found for the period of captivity. The prophets offered that alternative explanation. "The heathen shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity, because they trespassed against me". (The word translated as "trespassed" has the connotation in Hebrew of treachery and betrayal.)

Ezekiel, like other prophets before and after him, did not see God merely as protector of His land and His people. The prophets also saw God as one who sat in judgment of His people and ultimately of all people. The conquest of Israel was

evidence, not that God was weak but that God was holy and expected His people to be holy as well.

When the people ignored the commandments of God, and sought other gods more to their liking, God used the worshipers of those other gods to punish His own people. That demonstrated His power rather than His weakness.

But God is merciful as well as demanding, so the text goes on to say, “I will bring again the captivity of Jacob, and have mercy upon the whole house of Israel.” The Church has long made use of the history of Israel as a foreshadowing of the Gospel, and I intend to use the lesson from Ezekiel as a kind of template for interpreting the coming observances of Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost.

The prophets interpreted the defeat and destruction of Israel and its temple as God’s judgment on the sins and disloyalty of His people. In the same way, the Church has seen the crucifixion of Jesus as God’s judgment on the sins of the whole world. “He was wounded for our transgressions,” says Isaiah of the generation of Jews who went into exile, and the Church has been quick to apply that text to Christ.

Likewise, the resurrection of Jesus is prefigured in the restoration of Israel to its land and the rebuilding of its temple. Jesus Himself says, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” And lest we miss the point, the evangelist adds, “He spoke of the temple of his body.”

The coming of the Holy Spirit completes the work of God in the re-creation of the world. “I have poured out my spirit upon the house of Israel,” says Ezekiel. “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh,” says the prophet Joel.

You know that the same word means “breath” as well as “spirit”. That is true in Hebrew as well as in Greek. It was when

God breathed His spirit into Adam that the human race first received life. It is through the infusion of that same spirit or breath of God that the human race will receive new life. So it is that Pentecost completes the Passion Narrative and anticipates the New Jerusalem of which St. John speaks in the last book of the Bible.

Those of us who have been buried with Christ in His death and born anew of water and the Holy Spirit in baptism and have received the Holy Ghost at the hands of the bishop in Confirmation, we are the prototypes of that new creation.

In our baptismal vows, which we renewed in Confirmation, we chose to serve a God who not only protects us but also judges us. That is why we observe Lent as a season of penitence. That is why we observe Good Friday with sorrow.

But God is also a God of mercy and power. That is why we celebrate Easter with pomp and with great joy, and look forward to Pentecost as a day of great promise.

The bottom line is this. In the marketplace of religion, there are many gods, but only one Who is real. That God will be who He is and will do what He does regardless of what we may want or demand from Him. We can go shopping and choose other gods to worship and to serve, but in so doing we are worshiping fantasies, creations of our own imaginations and desires. The Bible calls them “idols.”

The God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus reveals His glory not only in protecting us but in calling us to repentance, in rescuing us from sin and death, and finally in making us over in His own image once again.

Ezekiel says, “Then shall they know that I am the Lord their God from that day forward”. And so we shall.