
Turn, Then, and Live

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 19-32

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 14, 2019 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

What is your go to excuse? I know you've got one or maybe more, at least I do. Remember the last time you were running late, or the time you got pulled over for driving just a bit too fast? Or how about when you didn't finish your assignment on time for school or work? Or when you had to bale on a commitment you made but could no longer keep? What did you say? "Sorry, the kids woke up late." "I ran into unexpected road construction." "Oh, I didn't know the speed limit was only 35 in this neighborhood." "The dog ate my first draft." What was your excuse?

My band director in high school used to say, "Excuses are like armpits; we all have them, and they stink!" We've all got excuses. We know then they are legitimate, and we know when they stink. Yet, I suspect we don't all have excuses like the man in Fargo, North Dakota who was arrested several years ago after a hit and run. The man ran into another car and into a mailbox and drove off. Unfortunately for him, witnesses got his license plate information. When the police tracked him down, he had quite the excuse. He said he lost control of his car because he was being bitten by a tarantula that belonged to his friend. The police were not able to locate the tarantula during the investigation or verify his story in anyway. Now that's some excuse.

Making excuses is no new thing when it comes to humans. Excuses are almost as old as time itself, especially when it comes to trying to cover our own wrongdoing. Our text from Ezekiel today begins with a proverb-like-saying that the exiled people of Israel have been repeating, a sort of excuse for how they've ended up where they are. "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Throughout the book so far, Ezekiel has been proclaiming the Lord's judgment on the people of Israel. He has declared how their covenantal unfaithfulness has meant and will mean being driven out of the promised land, having their homes and city destroyed, and living in exile. Through speech and action, Ezekiel has shared with the people messages from the Lord. These messages have often reminded the people of their unfaithfulness and how the Lord has been just in punishing them. So when chapter 18 begins with the Lord asking the people what they mean by quoting this proverb as their excuse for their current situation, it is clear the rebuttal will be strong.

The people say, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." The parents act and the children are punished. Can't you hear the people? "We didn't cause this mess! It's just like the proverb says, the children get the penalty for the unfaithfulness of the parents. It's not fair!" And surely after hearing the depth of covenantal unfaithfulness that Ezekiel has been proclaiming, the people surely thought, that isn't all on us! We haven't been that bad!

It's understandable how this proverb would be an appealing option as it resonates both experientially and theologically for the people. It's easier to blame their predicament on someone or something else. It's almost a natural tendency to see the speck of dust in someone else's eye when one has a log in his own (Luke 6:41). Beyond that, the people know the teaching about when God gave God's name to the people in Exodus: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, and forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7) You can hear the people saying through this

proverb, “It’s not our fault. God’s ways are not fair. This punishment was inevitable. God was going to punish us regardless of what we did. That is simply how justice works. ‘Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?’ (18:19)”

I wonder if you resonate with the people here? I wonder if you know anything about excuses when it comes to your life with God. Perhaps your excuses are even rooted in scripture or in your theological belief system. Maybe you’ve written off the possibility of having any part to play in faithfulness. Perhaps you’ve embraced such a strong understanding of God’s sovereignty that there is no room for your willful participation in and faithfulness to God’s ways. Maybe you have even come to believe that your particular favorite sin is of no concern because in the end what you do really doesn’t matter. Perhaps you get lost in despair or even in blaming God for your current situation and for it all being unfair because you believe God has some predetermined course on which you are just along for the ride. These excuses and many more like them come so easily as we try to justify ourselves and explain our own struggles to be faithful. I know how easy theologically justified excuses are for me. I suspect they come easily for you, too.

Yet, the Lord won’t allow false theological narratives to be the final word among the people. The word of the Lord through Ezekiel comes as a corrective to the people of Israel’s deterministic and fatalistic view of life with God... and it comes as a corrective to our own. Ezekiel makes it clear that the Lord will judge the people for their own actions. “All lives are mine... it is only the person who sins that shall die.” A son will not be held responsible for the righteousness or the evil of his father, and a father won’t be held responsible for that of his son. God sets the record straight. God is not capriciously acting out God’s judgments. God is not and will not make people pay the penalty for the iniquities and wrongdoings of their parents. Even when the effects of someone’s sin impacts others, this cannot properly be said to be God’s judgment on those people.

God’s correction to the people must have been at once both comforting and challenging for them to hear. On the one hand, knowing that God is not arbitrarily judging the people offers hope in the midst of despair. And understanding they are not finally bound by the sinfulness of their ancestors is surely good. Yet on the other hand, the Lord declared to the people that their own unfaithfulness and sin is why they find themselves in the place they are. And the Lord has warned them of more dramatic consequences still—faithfulness to God is life and death business. God tells the people, what you do, how you follow God’s command, your faithfulness, your righteousness, all these things matter in the present for the sake of your future. God expects faithfulness from God’s people in each new moment, with each new day. The Lord dismantled the people’s excuses and dismissed their preferred determinism. Now the people are facing God’s righteous judgment for their wrongdoing.

Thankfully, the story does not end there. If the story stopped there this would simply be a gospel of personal responsibility and self-determination, which is really no gospel at all. There is not much good news if the word stops with, “you get what you deserve;” “you reap what you sow;” “try harder;” “do better.” Even in a book as powerfully prophetic as Ezekiel, there is more to God’s justice than judgment. Ezekiel says, “God does not delight in the death of the wicked or of anyone for that matter.” Yet God cares deeply about faithfulness to God’s ways because they are the ways that lead to life for an individual and for the whole community. As our children say in Godly Play, God’s ways are the best ways—the ways that best lead to life. So God would rather that all people turn from their evil ways and live rather than continue in wrongdoing and perish. Just as much as God will not hold someone responsible for another person’s sins, God offers those

who have failed to follow God's commands the opportunity to turn and live. Through Ezekiel, God reminds the people that the failures and sinfulness of a person's past do not have to determine a person's future faithfulness. This is a message of dramatic hope in the middle of a terrible situation even as the consequences of people's sinfulness are on full display. Because of their constant unfaithfulness, the people have been sent to exile, but the future is not closed off. Death—that is, being separated from the God who gives life—is not a forgone conclusion.

God's grace and mercy overflows in the hope of a new future as Ezekiel proclaims the word of the Lord: "Repent and turn from all your transgressions... Cast away all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Turn, then, and live." Hope is alive in the opportunity for repentance. Hope is real as God gives people a chance to turn from the iniquity that will lead to their ruin. Hope abounds in the possibility of change inside and out—a new heart and new spirit along with right actions. It is good news not to be bound by past failings. It is good news that God enables people to "turn, then, and live."

Ezekiel is clear that God expects people to turn away from the ways that lead to death and turn toward faithfulness to God's ways that lead to life. This faithfulness is demonstrated through concrete practices, through the fruit produced by their lives. In the Gospel lesson from Luke 13, Jesus also speaks about the need for repentance, for turning from evil ways, and for the expectation of producing the fruit of righteousness. Jesus tells those following him, "Unless you repent, you will all perish..." And then he tells a parable about a fig tree. A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard. The tree failed to produce year after year for three years. The vineyard owner said to the gardener, "Cut this tree down. Why should it be wasting soil if it is not producing fruit?" Yet the gardener asked the owner to wait, so he could dig around the tree, fertilize it, and see if it will yet bear fruit. If it doesn't, then it can be cut down. The gardener believes that past failure does not have to have the final word. And the owner of the vineyard is willing to be patient. The expectation for bearing fruit remains, yet grace abounds because of the gardener's intervention and work. In line with the word of the Lord in Ezekiel, Jesus calls those who would follow him to repentance and to righteousness. Turn, then, and live. And like the gardener in the parable, Jesus intervenes when we who are the tree cannot produce the fruit on our own. Jesus doesn't remove the expectation of bearing fruit, but Jesus makes a way for the fruit to come. This is grace-filled responsibility. This is grace-enabled transformation.

Without the grace of the Gardner, not one of us could bear fruit; we'd already be cut down. But because of the life and work of Jesus the Gardener, we are enabled to turn and live. It is good news that we are not chained by some fatalistic future forged by our own or someone else's failings. It is good news that God doesn't want us to remain bound by the things that lead to our death and destruction. It is good news that God has made a way through Jesus that we do not have to be trapped by the same sins, or hurts, or pains of our past. It is good news that God calls us and enables us to bear the fruit of God's kingdom, fruit worthy of repentance (Luke 3:8). And it is good news that because of the patience of God, even when we don't bear fruit as quickly as we should, there is still hope that fruit will come. For all of us resident excuse makers, this is good news today. Enabled by God's grace, turn, then, and live. Amen.