

John 15.26-16.4; I Peter 4.7-11; **Ezekiel 36.22-28**

Exaudi

29 May 2022

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Hallelujah! +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The words that serve as the basis for the sermon today are an excerpt from the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday, *Exaudi*, Ezekiel chapter 36: "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: 'I will take you from all the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be My people, and I will be your God.'"

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

That's *you* Ezekiel is talking about. Gathered from the nations. You're not Jewish, are you? Sprinkled clean with water. Cleansed by your Holy Baptism. That's you.

But Baptism—it's hardly an outward thing. Listen to what happens. The old heart of stone is ripped out. The one that's dead in trespasses and sins. What good does a heart of stone do anyway? Nothing. That *was* you.

But now, a new, living, beating, pulsating, blood pumping heart has been put in. A heart of flesh, Ezekiel calls it. That's you, too.

And just as Adam in his fall exhaled for himself and all of his descendants the breath of life that the Lord had breathed into His nostrils—now, in your Baptism, the Lord has breathed back into you His life-giving breath, His Holy Spirit. "I will put my Spirit within you," Ezekiel says. That's you. Dead to the poisonous air of sin; alive by the breath of God's Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament. Dead to Satan; alive to Christ. Dead to death; and alive to everlasting life.

That's you. The Lord has already done it. Through water connected to His Word the Lord has performed a heart transplant surgery on you and filled your lungs with the healthy and life-giving oxygen of His Holy Spirit. The oxygen that your new heart pumps is the oxygen of eternal life. The death sentence for sin has been removed from you once for all, because your Baptism connects you to the once for all death of Jesus for sin. And you have been created anew. Behold! The old has passed away, and the new has come.

I often like to compare the "old" and the "new" life to a game.

So first, life according to the old game.

Just imagine the biggest game ever. The most important you've ever played in. But you're fated to lose. Your team isn't half the team the other is, either in terms of skill or size. You start off trying to play a clean game. Start off trying to work together as a team. But at halftime your team's getting schmiered. If

it looked bad before, it looks worse now. Even so, you've gotta play the game. So you go back out on the floor and fight like crazy to win a game you can't. And out on the floor in the second half, well, it's a disaster.

What happens then?

You start ignoring the rules. If you can get an elbow in here, and trip in there, you're gonna do it. If you can get by with a charge to get the basket that gets you back in the game, you're gonna do it. If yelling at the ref might change a call, you're gonna yell. If taking out the star shooter on the opposing team can "show them," you'll knock his feet out from under him when he's in mid air. Since everyone else on your team, it seems, flubs it up every time they've got the ball, you become a ball hog. Even if your team can't or won't the game then, by gum, you will.

Of course, it never works. You can't singlehandedly beat a team of five, and the refs catch you fouling all the time. But that only makes you more frustrated. More inclined to be aggressive. Even to the point of fouling out. Even to the point of lashing out your own teammates. And now everyone's the enemy—not just the opposing team. The refs are against you. The fans are booing. Your teammates have lost all respect for you. And you foul out and lose the game. Far from changing your fate, everything you do makes your fate worse.

That's what the old life is like. The "life" with the heart of stone. It lives under the frustration of a sealed fate: eternal death and hell. God's commandments never seem to get you ahead. They certainly don't change your fate. And so you begin to despise them. Everyone becomes your enemy, even God Himself. And in the end, you die in the self-absorbed misery of your own sin.

That's the old life. The old heart. The stony heart.

But that's exactly what God has rescued you from in your Baptism.

So imagine the same game. It's the biggest one ever. The most important you've ever played in. Except this time, your team isn't fated to lose, but to win. It's a sure thing. That's the new life. The life with the heart of flesh. The life lived in the Spirit given you in Baptism. The life that started at Baptism and ends with eternal life. You win!

Suddenly, the whole game looks different, doesn't it? You don't need to cheat to get ahead. If the opposing team throws an elbow, there's no need to throw an elbow back, because the win's certain! If the crowd turns against your team, you couldn't care less. And you just keep on playing with a smile since you know you're gonna walk off the floor at the buzzer with a ten-point win.

And the rules of the game?—Well, isn't half the fun of a game like this just playing the cleanest game you can, knowing that you can get an entirely clean win? That no one's gonna be able to say, "You won because you yelled at the refs so much they started to call the game your way"? Or whatever?

You see the comparison, right?

Alright. Apply that to your life in Christ.

The "game" you're in—this "game" of life and eternal life—it has already been won. Christ's grave is empty for a reason. That's what we celebrate during Easter. And because Christ's grave is empty, so will yours be. Your death has been vanquished because sin has been vanquished in Christ's death. By Holy Baptism, the dead old heart of stone has been ripped out, and the throbbing, pumping heart of flesh has been put in its place. So you know your fate. Death isn't the end for you, it's just the beginning ... of

everlasting life. And so you play the “game” differently. Not in frustration. Not in anger at the crowd, the refs, your opponents, or your teammates. And certainly not by flouting the rules. What’s the fun in that?

You see, that’s what the Lord means when through Ezekiel He says, “I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.” Let me say that again, “I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.”

That’s you! The old heart of stone—it can’t obey God’s statutes and rules. His Ten Commandments. Maybe in a sort of superficial way. But not from the heart.

But you can. Because you have a heart of flesh, and God’s Spirit within you.

The old of heart of stone—it can’t bear up under the sins of others against you. All it can do is lash out. Try to get what it has coming to it.

But you can. Because you have a heart of flesh, and God’s Spirit within you.

The old heart of stone—it can’t be optimistic about doing the “right thing” in life, because it’s not the righteous who it sees prosper, but the wicked. And it fixates on that.

But you can. Because you already know the outcome. You already know what blessedness awaits you in eternity, what blessings belong to you even in this life, regardless of how you must suffer here.

Why? Because the surgery has been performed. A heart of flesh has replaced the heart of stone. And the breath you breathe is the Spirit of God.

But the game’s still the game. You’ve still got to play it. Until you’ve breathed your last, you’ll have opponents. That’s what Jesus promises in the Gospel: “Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.” The crowd’s still gonna jeer against you. But, Jesus, who has conquered the world for you, says, “I have told you these things that, when their hour comes, you may remember that I told them to you.” Beloved in the Lord: don’t be surprised. But remain confident in Jesus and His victory.

For in that confidence in His victory—in your victory—you’ve been set free. Free to “play by the rules of the game.” Free to “serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace,” as St. Peter says.

That doesn’t make the game any less daunting. I know. I live the same way you do. How easy it is to fall back into old ways. To sin because you’ve been sinned against. To live as if God didn’t matter and as if you mattered most—because you’ve lost faith in the promise of the final victory.

Beloved in the Lord: when that happens, there are only two responses to it. Response number one is the “heart of stone” way that tells you either to try harder or to just give up entirely.

But you—you have a heart of flesh, and God’s Spirit within you. And the heart of flesh responds entirely differently. When its faith grows cold, when the flame of faith begins to flicker, when the horizon starts to look dark, when the fated victory starts to look like defeat—when that happens, true faith doesn’t need to try harder, it needs heat, it needs fuel for the flame, it needs light cast on the horizon, it needs to hear once again the promise of victory in Christ.

So what does it do? Where does it go? Not back into itself. Instead, it comes running to where God stokes the fire, fuels the flame, casts His light, and gives His promise: it comes to the Gospel. It returns to the promise of its Baptism, where God made you an heir of everlasting life. It comes to hear from your pastor's lips that God has set you free from the temporal and eternal punishment you deserve and given you instead every blessing in this life and the next. It comes to receive the fuel of the flame of faith—Christ's own crucified—AND RISEN—Body and Blood. And by that it joins you to the Head, that where He is, you may one day be also.

God grant it to you all for Christ's sake!

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

jsb
sdg