

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy")
September 4, 2011

<p>The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 18A, Revised Common Lectionary Ezekiel 33:7-11</p>
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In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you are a weather watcher like me, your eyes have probably been glued to the television as the geological and meteorological events of the last two weeks have unfolded.

A freak earthquake has inflicted millions of dollars in uninsured damage on our National Cathedral, and a powerful hurricane has walloped the Eastern Seaboard. The air that sustains our lives turned violent, and the bedrock on which our cities are grounded shuddered beneath our feet.

Shattered is our assumption that we have the power to subdue and domesticate the planet on which we live. We have learned in a new way that the earth is a powerful and dynamic creature, and that it is possessed of the power to destroy.

In looking at these events, some have said that God has turned away from us. Worse yet, some have said that God has turned against us. Yet, as fear and uncertainty abound, the appointed scriptures call our attention to the words of the Prophet Ezekiel: "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked [will] turn from their ways and live."

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Ezekiel lived during a period of great uncertainty.

Christians and Jews remember well the story of God delivering the Israelites into the Promised Land, but we often forget that their time there was short. Within a few generations, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II would conquer Judah, destroy the temple, and force God's chosen people back into the wilderness. For the better part of a century, the Israelites would languish in exile, spending twice as much time cut-off from the Promised Land as they had spent in the wilderness on their way there.

Enter now the Prophet Ezekiel.

To a community in exile, Ezekiel speaks words of harsh judgment. For thirty-two of his forty-eight chapters, Ezekiel rails against the iniquities of Israel. He chastises them for their immorality, for their worship of idols, and for the injustice of their leaders.

Ezekiel uses rhetoric that is all-too-familiar to the weather watchers among us. For the last two weeks, America's talking heads have spoken as though they were twenty-first century Ezekiels.

The storm that we know as Hurricane Irene would live for more than two weeks, but it would take only a day for some in our common public life to begin assigning blame. It would take only a day for the storm-swept American people to be told that they had angered a vengeful God; that they had brought on themselves the destruction that Irene left in her wake.

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For the last two weeks, social and religious leaders alike have railed against the iniquities of the world and condemned the excesses of modernity. They have invoked the name of God, just as Ezekiel did. But, unlike Ezekiel, the commentators who have spoken of God's anger have largely failed to speak of his love. In short, they have omitted the most important part of the story.

Ezekiel speaks harshly against the people of Israel, but he does not allow death and destruction to have the last word. Our reading today marks the beginning of an entirely new section of Ezekiel's writings, a sixteen-chapter exposition on the love of God. Only a few chapters later, Ezekiel will paint his famous picture of God breathing life into a field of dry bones. And, a few chapters after that, Israel will be blessed and restored at the hand of God. "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked [will] turn from their ways and live."

Ezekiel speaks prophetic words of judgment, but he also speaks unbridled words of hope. He comments on God's anger, but he ends with a celebration of God's love.

In the anxiety of wandering and in the despair of exile, God cares for his people, God speaks to his people, and God restores their fortunes.

At no time since the creation of the world has God ever abandoned his people. Not one moment from the very first moment has gone by in which God's people were made to stand defenseless. If Holy Scripture proves anything to us at all, it is this: Our God is the Lord of life, not the angel of death.

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Ezekiel opens this final section of his prophetic masterwork by posting us as God's sentinels against evil, and sentinels we are.

Evil is real. Evil is real, and its effects are all around us. We need modern-day prophets who will speak difficult words of truth, but they must never forget to speak also compassionate words of love. "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked [will] turn from their ways and live."

As we review the events of the last two weeks, we have some important choices to make:

We can choose to conclude that an angry God has exacted his revenge, or we can choose to believe that the earth is possessed of natural systems that correct disturbances in the atmosphere and release pressure along the boundaries of its tectonic plates.

We can choose to believe that the earth is static and unchanging, or we can believe that the earth is a powerful and dynamic part of God's creation.

We can choose to idly lament the state of the world, or we can post ourselves as sentinels against evil, and bring pleasure to the heart of God.

Amen.